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BOOK REVIEWS

God, Plurality, and Theological Method:
A Response to Kevin Vanhoozer's
Remythologizing Theology

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Introduction

In many ways *Remythogizing Theology* (hereafter RT) is a continuation of the methodological proposal Kevin Vanhoozer offers in *The Drama of Doctrine*. By that I mean that RT remains a work that is heavily, and from my perspective, decisively devoted to methodological considerations. To be sure, RT does offer some material constructions concerning the doctrine of God, but the focus is in many respects still on the formal theological proposal Vanhoozer has put forward. This is not necessarily a criticism, in the contemporary climate of academic theology it seems well neigh impossible to escape from the demands of method, particularly when a complex and detailed methodological proposal has been put forward and serves as the backdrop for subsequent work. RT is a richly detailed, complex, and sophisticated work in which the conclusions concerning the doctrine of God are leveraged in the service of methodological issues. This is no bad thing, since theological method ought to be determined by the subject matter of theological inquiry rather than allowing methodological considerations to control the subsequent doctrinal articulations. However, Vanhoozer's abiding interest in philosophical issues leads to a strong accent on methodological concerns throughout the book.

I mention this because in the response I offer here I will focus primarily on some general issues related to the theological method that result from Vanhoozer's doctrine of God as they are developed in RT rather than attempting a detailed engagement with the constructive details concerning the doctrine of God. I suppose the biggest question I find myself asking concerns the notion of God as a communicative agent as **the** formal and material principle of theology. It is not that I think Vanhoozer is wrong in identifying God as a communicative agent, both within God's eternal communal life as well as in God's economic relations with creation. I do not. In fact I am in thorough agreement with him on this point. God is a communicative agent. What I have concerns about is the exclusive way in which the notion of God as communicative agent seems to function in the theological method and construction of theology offered in this volume. Vanhoozer asserts: "The central wager in the present project is that both the transcendence and immanence of God are best viewed in terms of communicative agency rather than motional causality" (RT, p. 24). Emerging from this perspective is the

notion that the building blocks of theology should be interpersonal categories rather than causal. And that this way of talking about God should be seen in metaphysical terms. As Vanhoozer goes on to say: "A metaphysics of the Christian theodrama will therefore give pride of place to the speech and action of the divine *dramatis personae*. For the triune God in communicative action is the touchstone of reality according to this theodramatic vision of the whole" (RT, p. 25). While there is much to admire in the corrective this offers to well established forms of traditional theology, I still chafe at what seem to me to be the pretensions of either/or metaphysical assertions about God. The principles of divine accommodation and theological plurality ought to make us wary of such overarching assertions. In order to address this concern, I will briefly rehearse arguments I have made in greater detail in other places and ask some questions of Vanhoozer's work.[1]

Divine Accommodation

The idea of theological accommodation suggests that in revelation God does not break through language and situatedness, but rather enters into the linguistic setting and uses language in the act of revelation as a means of accommodation to the situation and situatedness of human beings. The church has long maintained the distinction between finite human knowledge and divine knowledge. Even revelation does not provide human beings with a knowledge that exactly corresponds to that of God. The infinite qualitative distinction between God and human beings suggests the accommodated character of all human knowledge of God. For John Calvin, this means that in the process of revelation God "adjusts" and "descends" to the capacities of human beings in order to reveal the infinite mysteries of divine reality, which by their very nature are beyond the capabilities of human creatures to grasp due to the limitations that arise from their finite character.[2] These observations give rise to the theological adage, *finitum non capax infiniti*, the finite cannot comprehend the infinite.

The natural limitations of human beings with respect to the knowledge of God made known in the process of revelation extend not only to the cognitive and imaginative faculties but also to the creaturely mediums by which revelation is communicated. In other words, the very means used by God in revelation, the mediums of human nature, language and speech, bear the inherent limitations of their creaturely character in spite of the use God makes of them as the bearers of revelation. In Chalcedonian Christology, the divine

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[1] See John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005) and John R. Franke, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009).

[2] On Calvin's understanding of divine accommodation, see Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, third edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 3-24.

and human natures of Christ remain distinct and unimpaired even after their union in Jesus of Nazareth. Reformed theological formulations of Christology consistently maintained that one of the implications of the Chalcedonian definition was the denial of the "divinization" of the human nature of Christ in spite of its relationship to the divine nature. With respect to the revelation of God in Christ, this means that the creaturely medium of revelation, in this case the human nature of Christ, is not divinized through union with the divine nature but remains subject to the limitations and contingencies of its creaturely character. Yet in spite of these limitations, God is truly revealed through the appointed creaturely medium. One of the entailments of this position is its affirmation of the contextual character of revelation. Since the creaturely mediums God employs in revelation are not divinized, they remain subject to their historically and culturally conditioned character. It simply needs to be added that what is true of the human nature of Jesus Christ with respect to divinization is also true of the words of the prophets and apostles in canonical Scripture. The use that God makes of the creaturely medium of human language in the inspiration and witness of Scripture does not entail its divinization. Language, like the human nature of Jesus, remains subject to the historical, social, and cultural limitations and contingencies inherent in its creaturely character.

This notion of accommodation is important in that it reminds of our limitations as finite creatures with respect to our knowledge of God. Christian teaching has long maintained the distinction between what we know and what God knows, even concerning things that God has revealed to us. Thus, even revelation does not provide human beings with a knowledge that exactly corresponds to that of God. The distinction between God's knowledge and that of finite human beings suggests that all human knowledge of God, and therefore ultimate truth, is the result of God's accommodation. In other words, in the process of revelation, God makes allowances for the limits of our understanding and descends to our level much the way a parent does with a child in order to provide instruction. God uses human nature, language, and speech to instruct us about the shape of our beliefs and the conduct of our lives. Yet these means are limited by virtue of the fact that they are created and finite. That is to say, they bear inherent limitations in spite of the use God makes of them in revelation. Further, Christian teaching on creation reminds us that although we are created in the image of God, we are finite and are qualitatively different from God. Our perspectives and understandings are shaped and limited by our particular locations and social conditions. From my perspective this situation is responsible, in part, for the multitude of Christian perspectives that are part of theological discourse. One of the questions in the present volume is how Vanhoozer understands the significance of divine accommodation in the methodological and material formulation of theology.

Vanhoozer makes mention of this phenomenon, noting that "divine accommodation is a matter of God's speaking through a variety of different voice-ideas in different ways. The canon itself employs shifting perspectives, some of which highlight God's authorship, others human agency, and still others Satan's principalities and powers" (RT, p. 349). Yet in spite of this acknowledgment of the principle of accommodation, it seems to play little formal role in the development of the doctrine of God proper as presented in this project or in the theological method that underpins the material presentation. Vanhoozer is not alone in choosing not to more explore the implications of divine accommodation more fully. John Calvin provides what is perhaps the classic articulation of this idea in the Protestant tradition. Yet beyond asserting it, Calvin does not really explore its implications for the development of a systematic approach to theology in a rigorous fashion. In appropriating Calvin's notion of accommodation, Vanhoozer says that what "Calvin terms accommodation is synonymous with what the present work has referred to as divine 'systems of projection'" (RT, p. 480). He understands this to mean that "God is free to make use of creaturely forms as media of his communicative action and self-communication" (RT, p. 481). In developing this conception of accommodation he underscores the affirmation that God is free to communicate through creaturely media. However, he does not seem to attend to the potential limitations that this places on creaturely media for the construction of theology or theological systems. Note that the limitation is not on God but rather on human beings whose knowledge of God comes through particular instantiations of socially constructed media. The question is what limitations are imposed on construction of theology from the human side due to the nature of the media that are used by God in self-revelation. In light of an affirmation of divine accommodation, with an emphasis on the limitations of language for knowledge of God, is it coherent to then articulate an approach to theology and theological method that develops one particular notion, in this case that of God as communicative agent, as "the touchstone of reality." From my perspective, divine accommodation precludes the strength Vanhoozer's claim. This challenge is heightened in the face of biblical and theological plurality.

Biblical Plurality

The result of divine accommodation is reflected in the contextual and plural character of the biblical witness. Canonical Scripture is itself a diverse collection of witnesses or, put another way, a manifold witness to the revelation of divine truth. In fact, the Bible is not so much a single book as it is a collection of authorized texts written from different settings and perspectives. Each of the voices represented in the canonical collection maintains a distinct point of view that emerges from a particular time and place. In other words, the Bible is polyphonic, made up of many voices. The self-revelatory speech-

act of God is received among diverse communities over long periods of time and in a plurality of cultural settings. The human reception and response is shaped by the communal and cultural settings in which revelation occurs. Divine revelation is received in a plurality of cultural settings, and is expressed and proclaimed from these diverse contexts to others over the course of history in accordance with the sending of the church into the world as a representative of the image and mission of God.

As truth written, Scripture paradigmatically reflects this plurality and diversity. In this way Scripture is the constitutive and normative witness for the formation and proclamation of Christian community. At the same time, it is also the first in an ever expanding series of presentations of the Christian faith throughout history for which it is paradigmatic. In this multifaceted and diverse collection of writings, each offers a distinct perspective that contributes to the whole such that none of the works included can be understood properly apart from their relation to the others. The Bible contains a diversity of literary forms such as narrative, law, prophecy, wisdom, parable, epistle and others. And within each of these forms we have the expression of numerous canonical perspectives. As mentioned in the first chapter the mere presence of four different Gospel accounts offers the most straightforward and significant demonstration of plurality in the biblical canon. The inclusion of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, each with its distinctive perspective on the life and ministry of Jesus alerts us to the pluriform character of the gospel. This stands as a powerful reminder that the witness of the Christian community to the gospel of Jesus Christ can never be contained in a single universal account. Instead it is always perspectival and characterized by a diversity of forms in keeping with the tradition of the biblical canon.

When we attempt to ease the difficulties of the multiple perspectives in Scripture to make matters more compact, clear, and manageable we suffer the loss of plurality and diversity that is woven into the very fabric of Scripture, and by extension, the divine design of God. If we had only one witness to the gospel in Scripture then perhaps it could be asserted that a single description of the Christian faith was adequate and sufficient for all. But the multiplicity and plurality of the biblical witness stands against such a notion. This means that true "catholic" or "universal" faith is pluralistic. "It is 'according to the whole,' not in the sense that it encompasses the whole in a single, systematic, entirely coherent unit, but rather in the sense that it allows for the openness, for the testimony of plural perspectives and experiences, which is implied in the fourfold canonical witness to the gospel."[3] The multiplicity of the canonical witness to the gospel is not incidental to the shape of the community from which it emerged under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and which it envisions for the future.

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[3] Justo L. González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 22.

Attempts to suppress the plurality of the canonical witness by means of an overarching, universalistic account lead to serious distortions of the gospel and the community that is called to bear witness to it. The plurality of forms and perspectives imbedded in the biblical witness suggests that no single voice or interpretive approach will be able to do justice to this diversity. Further, it may also be taken to imply that any of the forms and perspectives in the Bible itself will fail to bear adequate witness to the self-revelation of the Triune God if they are abstracted from the other forms and perspectives and used in a reductionistic fashion. In relating these diverse forms as the Word of God it is important to envision their plurality-in-unity and unity-in-plurality.

As such, the Bible has given rise to a variety of meanings and interpretations that are derived from the work of exegesis, theology, and the particular social and historical situations that have shaped its interpreters. In the task of seeking to read the Bible as a unity-in-plurality and plurality-in-unity, we should expect a variety of models and interpretations due to the very nature of the canonical texts themselves. Scripture itself authorizes multiple perspectives within a set of possibilities that are also appropriately circumscribed by the shape and content of the canon. Indeed, the theological and ecclesial plurality of the church is a faithful expression of the plurality contained in Scripture. Plurality is the intention and will of God as a faithful expression of truth. In the words of Lamin Sanneh: "For most of us it is difficult enough to respect those with whom we might disagree, to say nothing of those who might be different from us in culture, language, and tradition. For all of us pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but for God it is the cornerstone of the universal design."[4]

Theological Plurality

The outworking of biblical plurality is that Scripture depicts God in a rich and vast array of descriptions that arise from various human contexts and situations that provide truthful information about God. Yet these images, pictures, and metaphors remain inadequate descriptors of the divine when compared to the reality that is God in Godself. In addition, no one of these biblical descriptions can be developed apart from the others into a systematic account of the divine being without distorting the diverse picture of God provided in the pages of Scripture. Any effort at articulating a doctrine of God must allow for diversity and plurality if it is to be faithful to the biblical witness.[5]

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[4] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 27.

[5] For an example of what this might look like, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *The Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

The diverse descriptions of God contained in the Bible give rise to second-order theological models that are shaped by Scripture, various cultural settings, and the traditions of the church. The intent of this constructive process is to envision all of life in relationship to the living God revealed in Jesus Christ by means of biblically normed, historically informed, and contextually relevant models and articulations of Christian faith that communicate the Christian story. Theological models function as heuristic conceptions that enable complex issues and questions to be opened up for reflection and critical scrutiny.

Avery Dulles defines a model as "a relatively simple, artificially constructed case which is found to be useful and illuminating for dealing with realities that are more complex and differentiated."[6] And while models are not able to fully capture all the complexities and nuances of the phenomenon under consideration, they are able to stimulate engagement and interaction with it. Models are constructions and not exact representations of particular phenomena. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity described in chapter two serves as a model of God and the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It does not provide a direct and literal picture of God but it does, based on God's self-revelation, disclose actual features of God's character and the divine life. It is a second-order linguistic construction that, while not an exact replica of God, does provide genuine comprehension concerning the nature and character of God. As Stephen Bevans puts it, models function like images and symbols and "provide ways through which one knows reality in all its richness and complexity. Models provide knowledge that is always partial and inadequate but never false or merely subjective."[7] The work of chemists in studying molecules provides a helpful analogy. Chemists study and learn about molecules and molecular structure through the construction of models, but we do not think that the pictures of these models found in science text books are simply large-scale replicas of molecules. They are analogue models with structural similarity to molecules that facilitate genuine engagement and understanding with the phenomena we refer to as molecules and molecular structure.

The results and products of the constructive work of theology function in a similar fashion. As analogue or heuristic models of God and the relationship of God to the created order they facilitate engagement and provide accurate insight and understanding without the claim that they provide an exact representation of God. God is transcendent and unique, and categorically different from anything in creation. At their best, models of God provide us with images and symbols which enable us to conceive of the richness and complexity of the divine life and action of God in the world. At the same

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[6] Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, reprint edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

[7] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, revised and expanded edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), p. 30.

time, even effective and useful models that provide genuine insight into theological questions must still be characterized as producing knowledge that is nevertheless partial, fragmentary, and provisional. The early church theologian Irenaeus noted in accordance with the Scriptures that God is light. However, while acknowledging the truthfulness of this assertion, he also observed that God is unlike any light that we know or have access to as finite creatures.[8] In other words, while biblical revelation provides us with truthful statements about God, they cannot be read too literally or exclusively. Reflecting on this assertion by Irenaeus, George Hunsinger observes that "God's cognitive availability through divine revelation allows us, Irenaeus believed, to predicate descriptions of God that are as true as we can make them, while God's irreducible ineffability nonetheless renders even our best predications profoundly inadequate."[9] This underscores the accommodated and metaphorical nature of language, particularly with respect to the infinite and transcendent God of Christian faith. Yet the revelation of God calls on us to speak of God as representatives of God and participants in the divine mission of reconciliation. Thus, we construct models of God that are in keeping with God's self-revelation and that, as such, have analogical affinity with the nature and character of God and the relationship between God and the world.

In addition, these models do not function apart from other models. That is to say they are inclusive rather than exclusive. Inclusive models suggest the importance of multiple perspectives and angles of vision in the exploration and interpretation of theological truth. Bevans comments that due to "the complexity of the reality one is trying to express in terms of models, such a variety of models might even be imperative" and goes on to suggest that "an exclusive use of one model might distort the very reality one is trying to understand."[10] In light of the finite and fallen character of human knowledge and the divine subject matter of theology, we conclude that a proper conception of God defies a unique description and requires a diversity of perspectives. From this perspective all constructions are inadequate on their own and need to be supplemented by other models. This does not preclude the possibility of the adoption of one particular model as the most helpful from a particular vantage point, but as Avery Dulles comments, even this procedure does not require one to "deny the validity of what other theologians may affirm with the help of other models. A good theological system will generally recognize the limitations of its own root metaphors and will therefore be

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[8] Saint Irenaeus, *Five Books of Saint Irenaeus Against Heresies* (trans. John Keble; Oxford: James Parker and Company, 1872): § 2.13.4, pp. 123-24.

[9] George Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 47.

[10] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 30.

open to criticism from other points of view."[11] In other words, no one model is able to account for all the diversity of the biblical witness, the diversity of perspectives on it, and the complexity in the interaction between gospel and culture that gives rise to theology.

The constructed, contextual, and fragmentary character points to the need for a plurality of models in the task of theology. No single model will be adequate to account for the plurality of the biblical witness, the diverse perspectives on it in the tradition of the church, and the complexity entailed in the interaction between the gospel and culture that gives rise to theological reflection. The distinction between finite creature and infinite creator and the diversity of human situatedness and experience affirms that a plurality of models in dialectical relation to one another is imperative in the task of bearing faithful witness to the subject of theology. From my perspective, the exclusive use of one model of theology, even one as basic and helpful as God as communicative agent, will lead to a distortion of the very reality to which the model is attempting to make better known. The divine subject matter of theology, the limitations of human finitude, and the witness of Scripture itself lead to the conclusion that a biblically faithful understanding of God defies a single unique theological description and calls forth a plurality of perspectives in in relationship to each other.

Now in one sense, this account of plurality points to one of the strengths of Vanhoozer's dramatic and performance oriented understanding of doctrine and the model of God and revelation he offers in RT. It does in fact give rise to a plurality of models. However, while this plurality is commendable it is still contained within a particular theological framework, God as communicative agent, with a particular emphasis on speech and conversation as opposed to other forms of communication. But this seems to have the effect of rendering large swaths of the Christian tradition to the margins of theological discourse. For instance, in an online review of RT, Paul Helm raises a challenge to Vanhoozer about the marginalization of creedal language in his understanding of doctrine and the conception of God that follows form it.[12] Helm suggests that a thoroughly dramatized approach to doctrine fails to take into account with sufficient seriousness what he calls the "one-liners" about God that are a staple of the biblical witness and do not require, on his account, a dramatic interpretive approach. In the tradition, an emphasis on such statements has been the foundation for a more dogmatic approach to God and theology. On the other side of the ledger is the mystical tradition, which raises a challenge to all scholastic and overly intellectualized approaches to God. Both of these conceptions have deep standing in the tradition and neither would seem to have much of a place in Vanhoozer's

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[11] Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, pp. 34-35.

[12] Paul Helm, "Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing Theology*," http://paulhelmsdeep. blogspot.com/2010/05/this-is-first-of-several-posts-on-kevin.html.

model. Hence, the resulting plurality will be skewed in a particular direction that will lead to distortions in the multifaceted and polyphonic description of God contained in Scripture and the Christian tradition.

Here I think of a friend of mine, Mabiala Kenzo, a Congolese theologian who spends half of the year teaching for the Faculté de Théologie Évangélique de Boma in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the other half at Ambrose Seminary in Calgary. Kenzo is a former student of Vanhoozer's whose work on Paul Ricoeur is a very powerful piece of scholarship that works out the significance of Ricoeur's thought from the perspective of African theology.[13] Kenzo maintains that nothing is more important for African theologians than to throw off the colonizing tendencies of Western theology and to offer distinctively African contributions to theological discourse that draw from their particular experiences, contexts, and cultures in interaction with the Bible. As a self-identified evangelical, Kenzo deems the canon of Scripture to be non-negotiable in this enterprise. But all other traditions of intellectual discourse such as epistemology and metaphysics as they have been developed in the West or the conclusions of ecumenical councils are negotiable and must be so if African theology is to flourish and make its distinctive contribution to the talk of the church catholic about God. On the one hand, I think that Vanhoozer's approach to God and theological method would be interested in this sort of activity given its openness to plurality and diversity. On the other hand I wonder if it would still seek to exercise a colonizing influence on the sort of work Kenzo describes because of its insistence on a particular way of understanding God as communicative agent. I see encouraging signs of the former in the openness to plurality and diversity that are part of Vanhoozer's approach but also worrying indicators of the later in his assertion that God as communicative agent is **the** formal and material principle of theology. To the extent that he intends his approach as a supplement to ongoing, second-order, and contextual discourse about God, doctrine, and theology I believe Vanhoozer's work makes a significant contribution to that conversation. To the extent that he intends his model to supplant and eclipse other approaches, I fear that it will have the same colonizing tendencies that have marked so much of the Christendom shaped theological traditions of the West.

Concluding Questions

In light of the above, let me pose two questions to Kevin, one more theoretical, the other more practical: First, do you accept this interpretation? Are you intending the model you are proposing to eclipse other approaches to God and doctrine or do you see it merely as a supplement to other models? It

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[13] Mabiala Justin-Robert Kenzo, *Dialectic of Sedimentation and Innovation: Paul Ricoeur on Creativity after the Subject* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

seems to me more of the former, but I could be misreading you. If you generally intend the former (eclipse) how would you respond to the challenge that other models have support in Scripture and the Christian tradition, and if the latter (supplement) would you be open to seeing the limitations of the model you are proposing and if so, what might they be?

Second, it seems to me that good theology ought to help the church wrestle with and address the questions of the day. In my church (PCUSA) and I think yours (I believe you are, or at least were, a member of a PCUSA congregation) we have recently, as many will be aware, altered our ordination standards to allow for persons in the GLBT community to be ordained. This is, of course, highly controversial and is leading to factionalism in the denomination and in some cases separation. While many see this as simply unbiblical, others have made a vigorous argument in favor of this change based on a dynamic understanding of Scripture that is quite similar to aspects of the performance oriented or dramatic approach to God's communicative action in Scripture that you are setting forth. Let me pause here to say that I do not believe this means your model is inherently problematic or that it necessarily commits you to a particular position on the issue at hand. My question is: beyond merely asserting your particular position on the issue at hand, how might your remythologized and dramatic approach to God and doctrine help the church to think through the disputed questions of homosexuality and faithful forms of Christian life in relation to the unity of the church. Does it offer some advantages in addressing this situation that other approaches have not offered?