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Honest to God, a Voice from Heaven? Communicative Theism in Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing Theology*

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Introduction

Kevin Vanhoozer's recent book *Remythologizing Theology* [1] begins beguilingly, with a voice coming down out of heaven. On the mountain of transfiguration, the voice of God testifies aloud to Jesus Christ, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 17:5). "We heard this voice borne from heaven," reports the apostle Peter, "for we were with him on the holy mountain, and we have the prophetic word made more sure" (2 Pet. 1:17). There is much going on in the story of transfiguration, and in Peter's interpretation of it. "Yet what stands out," says Vanhoozer, "is the voice from heaven."

Back in the 1960s when theology could make headlines by killing off its god every now and then, John A. T. Robinson published his provocative book *Honest to God*.[2] "Our image of God must go," said Bishop Robinson, scorning the mythological idea of God as a supernatural agent who intervenes in the world; a being like us, but bigger and higher up. There is no way for rational people living a modern world to continue thinking of God as a supernatural being living "up there" somewhere, or even "out there" somewhere. Mixing a lot of Tillich with a little late Bonhoeffer, Robinson called for modern man to recognize that there was no room for God in a scientific universe, except perhaps as the ground of being itself. Fortunately, Jesus brings a kind of message from this ground of being: "It is in making himself nothing, in his utter self-surrender to others in love, that he discloses and lays bare the Ground of man's being as Love."[3] In fact, reflected Robinson, "assertions about God are in the last analysis assertions about Love."[4] That was 1963. What would the bishop say if he knew that nearly fifty years later, one of the most estimable theologians in the English-speaking world could, with a straight face and no ironic detachment, begin a major work of Christian doctrine with a voice from heaven? The God of Robinson was not even up in

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[1] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remthologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Hereinafter, cited in the body of the text as RT, followed by page reference.

[2] John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

[3] Robinson, *Honest*, p. 75.

[4] Robinson, *Honest*, p. 105.

heaven, and if he were, he certainly would not be so rude as to speak from there.

And yet here is Vanhoozer's big, interesting, intellectually serious book, with a quotation from God speaking in a voice from heaven, on the very first page. And from that opening gambit to the final sentence, "Only the communicating God can help" (RT, p. 504), the book is "all about voices –literal and metaphorical, biblical and theological, human and divine –and their ongoing interaction" (RT, p. xvii). Honest to God, this is a book about God speaking, and Christian theologians taking that voice seriously. But nothing is as simple as Bishop Robinson made it seem when he set up and knocked down his mythological straw god. The real voice of the real God from the real heaven is far more sophisticated than it seemed to some theologians at midcentury.

I would like to make three points. First, Kevin Vanhoozer has definitely moved on from method to matter with this book, and the matter is the doctrine of God. Not only is the matter the doctrine of God, but it turns out that something is the matter with the doctrine of God, and Vanhoozer writes to interrupt the flow of recent conversations. Second, this style of theology called remythologizing pays attention to Scripture in a powerful way, attending equally to what Scripture says and to how it says it. And third, none of this works without the doctrine of the Trinity, which turns out to be not just a doctrine announced by a voice from heaven, but our chance to overhear the conversation of the voices in heaven. Honest to God.

I. Method and Matter: The Doctrine of God

Vanhoozer has developed a reputation for reflecting deeply and at length on theological and hermeneutical prolegomena; perhaps too much at length. In the *Preface*, he admits that he has been "as guilty as anyone of procrastinating in the prolegomenal fields," but with this text he has succeeded in moving on from preparatory methodology to the thing itself, theology proper, the doctrine of God. More on that in a moment.

But first, let us admit that while it is good to get past prolegomena, there's no reason to rush away from methodology. Some sort of commitments about theological method are always at work underneath any presentation of doctrine, and it's better to be methodologically self-aware than oblivious. A great many pages of *Remythologizing Theology* are still devoted to methodology in a certain sense, and to defining what sort of theology this remythologizing is. Vanhoozer's style is to do something doctrinal and then to reflect on the meaning and reason and method of what he has done. He remains evangelical theology's greatest abstractor, conversationalist, and critic (if by "critic" we mean something more like a music critic or art critic than a biblical critic). He almost never operates at the "four views" level, simply surveying available options. That pedagogically useful method has a deadening effect on con-

structive doctrine. Vanhoozer's approach is to try something, redescribe it, abstract the principles from it, conceptually elaborate those, and then reapply them to the subject matter for further applications. Here in his theology of the God who communicates, for example, he describes his method in terms of listening to voices: "The primary voice I strain to hear is that of the triune God, discerned above all through the self-attestation of the living Word in the polyphonic Scriptures, aided and abetted by the antiphonal ecclesial choirs from East and West, as well as the occasional theological soloist" (RT, p. xvii). And of course there is plenty of hermeneutics here. I don't think we should ever expect Vanhoozer to stop honing his hermeneutics. But for all the ongoing interest in methodology, Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing* takes the step forward to doctrine proper, and his primary doctrine is that God communicates. It is no merely methodological point that God communicates; it puts us squarely into "first theology," "that coordinated construal of God, Scripture, and hermeneutics that distinguishes one theological approach from another" (RT, pp. 13-14). In this book, the emphasis falls on the doctrine of God, and if it is not a complete doctrine of God, at least it is "an essay in aid of the development of the doctrine of God."

To be precise, the doctrine of God has been developing in a certain direction for some time now, and Vanhoozer is staging an intervention in that development. He is plotting the overthrow of recent orthodoxy. I say "plotting" as a Vanhoozeresque pun, because "plot" is the primary meaning behind the root word "myth" in this project. "Mythos is Aristotle's term for dramatic plot: a unified course of action that includes a beginning, middle, and end" (RT, p. 5). To plot the overthrow of recent orthodoxy is to correct recent theological trends by paying more disciplined attention to the unified course of action carried out by God in the Son and the Spirit, and recorded in the pages of Scripture.

What Vanhoozer chronicles in this book is the rise of a new kind of theism, which he gives the appropriately unwieldy title of "voluntary kenotic-perichoretic relational theism" (RT, p. 175), or sometimes "voluntary kenotic-perichoretic relational panentheism" (RT, p. 297) or ontotheology. By assigning an almost comically long and awkward name to this diffuse trend in modern theology, Vanhoozer accomplishes a couple of things. First, he makes the doctrine seem like a difficult construct. This is a nice rhetorical feat. The advocates of relational panentheism usually present it as the common-sense view, suggesting that anyone who ever prayed to the living God was presupposing relational panentheism, while only a seminary student could ever read enough theology to think of God any other way. Second, he throws erudite adjectives at the thing until something sticks. If you've read anything in modern theology, one or two of those half-dozen terms will ring a bell and let you know what body of literature he's addressing. This approach works well because, after all, *Remythologizing* is high-level theological project intended for an audience that has already read a lot of theology. Vanhoozer is not writing for

beginners here, though he always writes very clearly. But in this volume he is joining the conversation in the middle, and much has already been said. He is necessarily commenting on vast quantities of other books. So calling the movement kenotic-perichoretic relational *et cetera* accomplishes much.

Stated most broadly, this new theism reaches as far back as Spinoza and is as recent as open theism and the latest transmogrifications of process theology. It is apparently what almost everybody thinks now about how God relates to the world. This trend of thought is set in intentional opposition to "classical theism," that long-standing central Christian tradition of biblical theology elaborated in critical collaboration with Greek metaphysical concepts and vocabulary. While admitting that the older tradition had some problems, Vanhoozer tends to call the older tradition at its best "biblical-theological classical theism." The rejection of classical theism in favor of voluntary kenotic-perichoretic relational theism got its start with the movement to dehellenize the simple gospel: "That the God of classical theism is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but the God of Greek metaphysics has become the 'new orthodoxy': something everywhere believed by (almost) everyone" (RT, p. 89). But as Vanhoozer argues, the widespread, deconstructive "fear of Greek-think" (RT, p. 90) throws out the baby with the bathwater. A sympathetic reading of the church fathers, medievals, and reformers shows that they were hardly captive to Hellenistic categories. Though using them, they pressed through them at crucial points and made the categories serve the new message.

> Greek philosophy affirmed 'that which is,' but church theology affirmed 'he who is' and discovered 'who he is' and 'what he is like' thanks to 'what he has done' in Israel and in Jesus Christ. The God of what we may call biblical-theological classical theism is neither indifferent nor apathetic but 'with us' and 'for us' (RT, p. 93).

In the struggle between classical theism and the intentionally counter-classical relational panentheism, Vanhoozer clearly takes sides. He describes his offering as communicative theism, but that is not so much a brand new third option as it is a kinder, gentler classical theism. Perhaps a neo-classical theism, or a communicative twist on the classical statement.

For example, in the crucial question about whether God suffers, Vanhoozer ultimately answers no, contra Moltmann, just as he had earlier insisted that God truly acts and speaks, contra Bultmann. Despite the fact that the remythologizing in the title rhymes with and counteracts the demythologizing of Rudolf Bultmann, the more prominent theological foil throughout this project is Moltmann, the most important leader of what some have called the "theopaschite revolution" of the twentieth century. In a passage quoted by Vanhoozer, Hans urs von Balthasar noted that "Today's theologians, while they are aware of the traditional axiom of God's unchangeability, and notwithstanding the danger of falling back into mythology, seem to have no qualms about speaking of the pain of God" (RT, p. vii). If

the orthodoxy of the old classical theism depicted a God who could speak but not suffer, the new orthodoxy depicts one who cannot really speak, but can't help but suffer. One of the arguments of *Remythologizing* is that it is high time we got our anthropomorphisms in order.

Though divine suffering is a key issue, and the one that Vanhoozer chooses to end the book with, it is not the only aspect of the doctrine of God that he handles. There are three major issues named in the subtitle; along with divine authorship and divine passion there is divine action, a subject much discussed lately in the context of natural science. It raises the question "Is theism necessarily mythological?" (RT, p. 2) and shows up the new relational panentheism in its various forms as a way of sidestepping the problems apparently associated with affirming divine action. If classical theism runs the risk of being mythological by depicting God as an outside agent who intervenes abruptly, relational panentheism runs the risk of suggesting that God merely influences intelligent agents. This deadlock is one of the places where Vanhoozer's communicative theism indicates a third way: God does not abruptly intervene nor merely influence. Instead, as a communicator, God interjects (RT, p. 316).

So without mobilizing an entire doctrine of God, Vanhoozer judiciously picks his battle. A voice may come down from heaven, but Vanhoozer warns that anthropomorphisms like this "are only the tips of the revelatory iceberg" (RT, p. 192). Later he notes that "There is no more challenging test of biblical reasoning competence than to identify and interpret anthropomorphisms" (RT, p. 479). That is why, beginning with a voice, this book necessarily confronts the most epochal development in the doctrine of God in modern times: the shift toward panentheism, and what that shift implies for first theology. Vanhoozer makes this set of claims we have just explored, and calls the resulting project a particular kind of theism: "communicative theism." Why describe it thus, rather than calling it "communicative theology" or "a doctrine of God which features the category of communication?" The main answer is simply, that's how theologians talk these days. In contemporary theological idiom, something like "process theism" is opposed to "classical theism;" "freewill theism" morphs into the more aggressive "open theism" and gives way to a more generalized "relational theism;" a particular collaborative project broadcasts itself as "canonical theism," or a very Trinity-focused doctrinal project may call itself "triune theism." Putting an adjective in front of the noun theism seems to suggest a certain comprehensiveness, as if to say "this is the way to believe in God." It's a package deal, a coordinated set of claims and judgments that hang together as a holistic account of God. As a result, we end up with a lot of different theisms in the marketplace of ideas, which is surely confusing to atheists if they are listening. Since this is a guild book, a book written by an academic theologian for an audience of other academic theologians (though others are welcome to overhear the discussion), Vanhoozer makes use of the guild's conventions and names his work a

theism: communicative theism. But he is also characteristically self-aware about the language he is using, and pokes a little fun at it with the ubiquitous Vanhoozeresque pun and wordplay:

> To proceed with bold and humble honesty to God is to charge with a theological light brigade: theisms to right of them, theisms to left of them, into the valley of ideological warfare, into the jaws of church historians and other academicians, ride the 144,000 (RT, p. xvi).

As it turns out, Vanhoozer's account of theism under the categories of communication is in fact a pretty comprehensive undertaking. He keeps his attention focused on the doctrine of God and the God-world relation. But he leaves himself space to develop a few crucial lines of thought, in particular in the doctrine of salvation (soteriology). "Everything comes down to the way theology conceptualizes the God-world relation (RT, p. 175)." It is no contradiction that Vanhoozer can later apply the project to the foundations of soteriology and say that "Everything depends on how one understands the way in which human creatures take part in God's communicative activity such that they actually receive God's saving light, life, and love. Everything thus depends on getting the ontology of being-in-communion with God right, and this in turn depends on rightly interpreting what it means to be 'partakers in the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4)" (RT, p. 271). Because he is operating at the level of first theology, Vanhoozer is able to make theological decisions with ramifications for vast stretches of a theological system. His adjustment to the doctrine of God has immediate implications for the doctrine of providence, for example. And he spends considerable time on its application to the field of soteriology, wherein God is said to communicate himself savingly, resulting in union with Christ.

This is just a sketch of the major course correction Vanhoozer introduces. But it is enough to show that he does not just barely cross over from prolegomena into one doctrine, but has moved into the field of constructive theology with such a full grasp of the fundamentals that he must now hold himself back from spelling out an entire systematic theology of the communication of God.

II. How God Says What He Says: "The Manner is Always More Excellent than the Thing"

English metaphysical poet Thomas Traherne (1636-1674) insisted that in spiritual matters, "the manner is always more excellent than the thing."[5] This has great implications for the idea of God as author. Vanhoozer's emphasis is never simply that God is an author, but always on what kind of author God is. Just as everything depends on exactly how we construe the God-world relationship, it is not enough to construe it as a relation of authorship. There are

[5] Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations* 3:57 (Dobell, London 1908), p. 204.

authors, and then there are authors. The task of theology is to come to understand what sort of author God is. Vanhoozer surveys a wide range of options for the specific style and strategy of the divine author. But the basic answer is that God is an author like Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

Here Vanhoozer takes up a literary quarrel that has become classic in modern criticism. Both Mikhael Bakhtin and George Steiner have noted that there is a fundamental opposition between the two great Russian novelists of the twentieth century, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. The critical discussion of this antinomy is vast, but the basic idea is perhaps best stated in George Steiner's first book, tellingly entitled *Tolstoy OR Dostoevsky*:

> Thus, even beyond their deaths, the two novelists stand in contrariety. Tolstoy, the foremost heir to the traditions of the epic, Dostoevsky, one of the major dramatic tempers after Shakespeare; Tolstoy, the mind intoxicated with reason and fact; Dostoevsky, the contemner of rationalism, the great lover of paradox; Tolstoy, the poet of the land, of the rural setting and the pastoral mood; Dostoevsky, the arch-citizen, the master-builder of the modern metropolis in the province of language; Tolstoy, thirsting for the truth, destroying himself and those about him in excessive pursuit of it; Dostoevsky, rather against the truth than against Christ, suspicious of total understanding and on the side of mystery;… Tolstoy, like a colossus bestriding the palpable earth, evoking the realness, the tangibility, the sensible entirety of concrete experience; Dostoevsky, always on the edge of the hallucinatory, of the spectral, always vulnerable to daemonic intrusions into what might prove, in the end, to have been merely a tissue of dreams; … Tolstoy, who saw the destinies of men historically and in the stream of time; Dostoevsky, who saw them contemporaneously and in the vibrant stasis of the dramatic moment; Tolstoy, borne to his grave in the first civil burial ever held in Russia; Dostoevsky, laid to rest in the cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky monastery in St. Petersburg amid the solemn rites of the Orthodox Church; Dostoevsky, pre-eminently the man of God; Tolstoy; one of His secret challengers.[6]

What is crucial for Vanhoozer is that their two modes of authorship suggest two different construals of the God-world relationship; even two different theisms: "Tolstoy and Dostoevsky work with competing conceptions of authorship that parallel the way in which the two types of theism we examined in Part I view the God-world relation" (RT, p. 306). Tolstoy has "consummate narrative artistry," but also monologic determination by an author with absolute control over the characters. The narrator in Tolstoy sees everything, the omnipotent speaker knows everything, the narrative voice invests every

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[6] George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1959), p. 347.

detail with meaning, and, reigning from on high, draws relationships among isolated incidents which no character in the story can see or comprehend. His works are gorgeous, unsurpassably rich narrations, "large-scale verbal compositions, poetic forms that provide meaningful frames for a sequence of historical and social events" (RT, p. 306). But if you once fall out of favor with that authorial voice, if you once notice the man behind the curtain, it is a fatal fall. There is nowhere to go to flee from his presence. "Tolstoy's characters are merely mouthpieces for the author who uses them to express his own ideas, teach his own values, and display his own point of view" (RT, p. 307).

Classical theism, when it thinks of God as author, has been attracted to thinking of him on the model of Tolstoyan authorship. "Theologians, philosophers, and scientists have all made use of the analogy of authorship to explore the God-world relation though the authorship they typically have in view, for good or for ill, is the Tolstoyan variety…" (RT, p. 307). And there are benefits to thinking this way: "The strength of the Tolstoyan model is that it upholds God's authorial transcendence… A monologic God is answerable to no one: there is no other point of view from which to pose a question, no other voice to articulate it even if there were" (RT, p. 309). The major problem is not the oppressiveness of the authorial intrusion, but the way it "fails to account for the dialogical interaction of God and human beings depicted in the Bible or, for that matter, the Bible's diverse human authorial voices themselves" (RT, p. 309). Vanhoozer is not worried about an overly-sovereign God so much as he is worried that we risk having an inadequate read of what God has authored, and how he has authored it. He is not just thinking about how to read well, but is taking the relation of divine author to sacred text as a model for the God-world relation writ large.

Thus he is quite concerned to make the jump from "how to read a book" to how to use authorship as a conceptual model for the God-world relationship.

> In light of God's speaking creation, covenant, and canon into being, divine authorship is an apt aid for understanding the nature of the dramatic action outside (and inside) the world of the text, and thus a helpful heuristic for grasping divine transcendence and immanence. Still, important questions about the author's control, authority, and presence to the world of the text remain (RT, p. 305).

That triad, "control, authority, and presence," is a nod to the "theology of Lordship" developed in the last few decades by evangelical theologian John Frame. Vanhoozer's appreciative use of the CAP triad shows that, without repudiating a Frame-like theology of lordship, Vanhoozer is moving on to a theology of authorship. "Lordship as authorship" is not a bad way of understanding the trajectory of *Remythogizing Theology*, a book which happens to be dedicated to Frame (RT, p. xix).

But here is a Vanhoozer breakthrough, made possible by his critical abilities. Instead of Tolstoyan monological authorship, Vanhoozer suggests a kind

of Dostoevskyan authorship: "a new literary genre: the polyphonic novel," or as Vanhoozer glosses it, a "dialogical polyphonic authorship" (RT, p. 311). Dostoevsky peoples his novels with "characters that speak in their own voices, not merely as mouthpieces for their author." In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zosima speaks his own point of view, which may be right or wrong; Ivan Karamazov argues the devil's point of view so forcefully that the author seems helpless to silence him. The conflict between the faith of Zosima and the doubt of Ivan plays itself out in the book itself, rather than (as in Tolstoy) in the voice of the narrator. If Dostoevsky were a director of a war movie, one gets the sense he would equip the actors with live ammunition. "What Dostoevsky projects into the world of his works is not a finished plot but unfinished voice ideas" (RT, p. 330).

All of this engagement with the critical discussion of two great novelists is deeply interesting, but the doctrinally-motivated reader may begin to wonder whether it actually counts as theology. "My wager," Vanhoozer reassures us, "is that this brief detour into the dispute over the meaning of Dostoevsky's authorship will yield theological dividends for understanding God's communicative relation to the world" (RT, p. 311). Indeed it does, in two ways. First, it sharpens the meaning of divine authorship in a way that clarifies the God-world relationship. "God authors/elects creatures to be dialogical agents in covenantal relation through whom his Word sounds (and resounds)" (RT, p. 331). But secondly, it leads the theological interpreter into scripture in a way that is guaranteed to be more fruitful than monlogic models, because more appropriate to the way God has spoken. Vanhoozer pays close attention not only to what God has said (as all good evangelicals know they should), but consummately to the way God has said it. "The Bible is both a unified (one mythos) and many-voiced (i.e. polyphonic) discourse whose form is theologically significant" (RT, p. 26). Scripture does not just contain ideas embedded in genres, but also "Genre-ideas" (RT, p. 354). Again, "the Bible schematizes God's being-in-act through mythos, through the variety of canonical forms that together comprise the theo-drama, the form of forms" (RT, p. 477). And again, "each biblical form that contributes to the mythos is itself a thing God has done, a word God has made" (RT, p. 477). And in one of his fullest statements of the way the form and content of scripture interpenetrate:

> Biblical reasoning involves more than simply abstracting and ordering statements about God into a cognitive-propositional system… God speaks through the prophetic and apostolic discourse of the Bible as a playwright speaks through the various characters in a play. God speaks his mind dialogically, communicating through different voice-ideas from multiple points of view in a variety of ways (i.e. canonical schemata). All the voices, in their specific registers, are necessary in order to achieve the total communicative effect: the understanding and obedience of faith (RT, pp. 478-79).

This massive attention to the manner of Scripture also accounts for why most of chapter 1 (RT, pp. 35-57) is a series of biblical passages explored one after the other, with more exegetical insight than is strictly necessary for a work of high-level theological abstraction. Vanhoozer is not only our chief theorist of the Theological Interpretation of the Bible, but also a gifted practitioner who increasingly makes room in his books to carry out the task.

One could describe *Remythologizing Theology* as a "higher evangelicalism," in that evangelicals are only supposed to attend to what God says, but Vanhoozer attends to how God says it. He goes deeper into the word of God, listening to the voice of God. Perhaps he even goes beyond *sola scriptura* to *sola vox scriptura*; perhaps even the genres of the Bible are inerrant. At any rate, "Biblical reasoners do well to appreciate the subtlety and depth of the divine rhetoric" (RT, p. 193). God's accommodation is really to be thought of as indirect communication, which makes divine speech tricky; more like "the authorship that Kierkegaard labeled 'indirect communication' than… Hegel's 'system' of abstract theoretical truth" (RT, p. 191). Since "the watchword for indirect communication is 'show, don't tell" (RT, p. 191), divine revelation is an irreducible mixture of event and word, with implications for how the second-order labor of theology should be carried out. When theological approaches to scripture fall flat, it is because we think we can have information without personal transformation. "Theology only compounds the problem when it gives the impression that knowing God is a matter of neat theoretical packaging (i.e. systems of belief)" (RT, p. 191). In contrast, "Remythologizing theology approaches each of the various forms of biblical discourse as an important ingredient in the divine communicative strategy" (RT, p. 192). In other words, we have to do with not just a voice from heaven, but this particular voice, speaking these particular words, in a complex event of communication.

III. What the Trinity Has To Do With This

Earlier I mentioned that (contra the irresistible rhyming of remythologizing with demythologizing), the major opponent throughout this book is not Bultmann, but Moltmann. The strange cluster of ideas that make up the new orthodoxy, especially the kenotic-relational panentheism that has been drawing the doctrine of God toward itself for the past several decades, was identified long ago by Karl Barth. In a letter that he wrote to Moltmann on November 17, 1964 (the year after *Honest to God*, but responding instead to Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*,) Barth asked the younger theologian, "Would it not be wise to accept the doctrine of the immanent trinity of God?"[7] It would indeed have been wise, but this Barthian recommendation was not

[7] Karl Barth, *Letters 1961–1968* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 174-76.

quite the path that Moltmann's theology ever took.[8] It is, however, a chief element of the course correction offered by Vanhoozer's remythologized theology and the communicative theism it advocates. The doctrine of the immanent Trinity of God makes all the difference in Vanhoozer's doctrine of God.

Vanhoozer is definitely on the bandwagon with the rest of modern theology in being excited about the Trinity.

> To recover the doctrine of the Trinity is to recover the God of the gospel: The personal and compassionate love of the Father made known in Christ through the Spirit… And it is to understand that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not simply the way God appears to be but rather the way God truly is (RT, p. 105).

But as his radically consistent trinitarianism becomes more explicit, it becomes evident that Vanhoozer is often standing against much of the recent recovery of Trinitarian theology, or at least against the sort that turns toward the wildly relational and economically reductionistic. His criticisms are sharp and to the point: "While something important has indeed been recovered, something equally important has also been lost" (RT, p. 111). "What the 'second coming ' of Trinitarian theology has lost, in short, appears to be the fatherhood of God… the thrust of the new orthodoxy is to inflate the economic Trinity precisely in order to call into question the aseity and impassibility of God" (RT, p. 112). The dangers of this inflation are evident: "Unless we resist collapsing the Father into the work of his two hands, Son and Spirit, it will be difficult to resist what Calvin thought to be the persistent temptation in religion, namely, to blur—or collapse altogether—the distinction between God and the world" (RT, p. 112).

Much of *Remythologizing Theology* is devoted to shooting down trouble that Moltmann started in the doctrine of God. Vanhoozer warns that without the kind of absolute transcendence secured by the immanent Trinity, the identity of God is jeopardized: "Instead of being "I am who I am," God becomes the 'I am the one you make me to be.'" And while Moltmann never said anything that drastic, he did make use of the gloss, "In the beginning was relation," a quotation of Martin Buber that Moltmann deployed on p. 11 of *God in Creation*, the book in which he finally explicitly drew the panentheistic conclusions of his version of Trinitarian theology. "At the end of the twentieth century," as Vanhoozer tells the story, "theologians awoke (with a groan?) to find their world, and ontology, relational" (RT, p. 117). He is right to track all of the confusion over divine suffering back to Moltmann's fundamental loss of the immanent Trinity. "The way in which one relates the economic to the imma-

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[8] The complexity and compromises of Moltmann's account of the immanent Trinity is something I have chronicled in *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

nent Trinity has everything to do, as Moltmann rightly notes, with 'the question about God's capacity or incapacity for suffering'" (RT, p. 391).

How does Vanhoozer intervene to fix the modern Trinitarian problem? Not only does he have the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity sorted out well in advance ("The economic Trinity is, or rather communicates, the immanent Trinity," [RT, p. 294]), but he also understands the kind of descriptive dogmatic work necessary to continue upholding the priority of the immanent Trinity. In one of the richest sections of the book, he dares to describe the inner life of God, on the basis of the revelation in the economy. "We begin, then, with a brief description of the inner life of the triune God—the eternal doings of Father, Son, and Spirit—to the extent that it can be discerned from the communicative patterns that comprise the economy" (RT, p. 243). We

> come closest to understanding God's inner life by attending to the intra-Trinitarian communicative action in the economy, particularly the dialogical interaction between the Father and Son that is on conspicuous display in the Fourth Gospel. There are three main topics in these Father-Son dialogues: mutual glorification; the giving of life; the sharing of love (RT, p. 261).

A series of sections on the divine light, life, and love are an exploration of how the life of God is a rich and full thing, an inner plenitude which far outstrips our experience. And this is where Vanhoozer makes it clear that his remythologizing project aims at understanding the story of Scripture as a real revelation of who God is:

> Because the way God is in the economy of corresponds to the way God is in himself, we may conclude that the Father, Son, and Spirit are merely continuing in history a communicative activity that characterizes their perfect life together…Hence this triune dialogue in history fully corresponds to the conversation God is in himself (RT, p. 251).

This leads Vanhoozer to describe the Trinity in terms of his root metaphor, communication: "God is the communicator, communication, and communicatedness. The triune God is the agent, act, and effect of his own self-communication" (RT, p. 261).

Time would fail us before we could explore the treatise on the divine emotions that concludes the book (a remarkable performance). But suffice it to say that Vanhoozer's leisurely account of the eternal life, light, and love of God helps anchor the reader in a notion of God's inner immanent-trinitarian plenitude, so that when Vanhoozer offers a somewhat deflationary account of the recent theopaschite orthodoxy, nothing seems to have been lost. We have already glimpsed the fullness of the immanent Trinity. We are encouraged to take God's words to us more seriously because we have been reminded that the conversation he has with us is in perfect correspondence to, and in real participation with, the conversation that makes up the divine life

itself. In other words, as the book works out its logic, we no longer have simply a voice from heaven to account for, but a voice in heaven; an eternal communication about life, love, and light, which breaks through and makes itself heard on the mount of transfiguration in a moment of revealed life, light, and love. If Bishop Robinson was worried about mythology, things are far worse than he imagined, because as far as biblical commitments go, everything is much better than we imagined. Vanhoozer fights mostly not with Robinson, but with Feuerbach. And he turns the tables: "Projection is first and foremost a divine communicative activity. Jesus Christ is the God-projected word and image of God into the created order" (RT, p. 271). Communicative theism is "triune authorial theism" (RT, p. 26), and

> 'authoring' covers what God does as creator, reconciler, redeemer, and perfecter, and so serves as a metaphor for the economic Trinity as well: The Father 'authors' in Christ through the Spirit.' Triune authorship… enables us better to conceive (1) the absolute distinction between Creator and creation; (2) the triune God whose being is a being-in-communicative action; and (3) God's relation to the world, and to Scripture, in terms of an 'economy of communication' (RT, p. 26).

Ronald Reagan was nicknamed "the Great Communicator," but with the advent of communicative theism, we might need to recognize that as an idolatrous title. On the other hand, communicating may be one of God's communicable attributes. Just as the mealtime prayer of classical theism taught us to pray "God is great, God is good," the insight of communicative theism is that God is the Great Communicator, God is the Good Communicator. Let us thank him for every word that proceeds out of his mouth.