

Response to Review Essays on
Systematic Theology, volume 1,
The Doctrine of God

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I am a grateful theologian. Summoned to this systematic work, I have been surrounded by wise counselors and critics, who generously support me, and show me weak places that must be strengthened, confusions that must be clarified, questions answered or solved. These essays before us are written by such counselors, and I have benefited deeply by their insights, their assessments, and their insistent queries. I could wish only for more time to answer, and for better answers.

I thank these theologians and exegetes for their clear and careful reading of my first volume: the major structural and dogmatic themes are laid bare here. The central weight-bearing pillars of “theological compatibilism” and “transcendental relation” are identified and set in their proper place; the dogmatic underpinning of Holy Scripture acknowledged—and tested; the primacy given to Divine Unicity and to the metaphysical Perfections are catalogued and rightly ordered; the recognition of humility and lowliness as expression of God’s moral Power; the prominent place given to doxology and to prayer also noted, and given their proper Augustinian and Platonic coloring; and the place of the theological tradition, alive in both the past and present-day doctors of the church, are confirmed as the prime environment for dogmatic work. These are the crimson threads of my volume, as I see it, and in these essays I have the incalculable gift of being *heard*. I am especially honored that Professor Bennett would place my work in the larger frame of theological work by Kathryn Tanner and Sarah Coakley, two theologians I admire deeply, and consider my teachers in the faith.

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As I read these essays, two themes stand out: gender and feminist analysis, on one hand; and the reading of Holy Scripture, on the other. Professors MacDougall and Bennett raise feminist matters with special urgency; Professor Moberly, theological exegesis and philology. It seems to me that these two concerns capture well the theological passion I would hope to ignite: the bedrock of scripture, which generates the Christian liberty that pours into the world, illuminating it and setting it ablaze. I consider the Christian faith, and so, its theology, as a radical incursion into the world of time and things; nothing seems as political to me as is Christian doctrine. Of course it may seem odd to say that a theology as traditional in tone, and archaizing in appearance as this one is, remains at base also a radical and political one; but I believe this is so. Feminism and gender analysis are ingredient in any serious political vision, and it is entirely proper to ask what my convictions are about these great revolutions in the earthly order. Both Professors Coakley and Tanner have made these themes central and explicit in their systematic work in a way that far outshines my own; but I hope I have caught some of their light.

In my view, feminism is the movement that teaches and demands the full humanity of women. It is at heart a *movement*, a dynamism let loose in the world of constriction and diminishment. It is a proud and restless struggle for the full expression, emancipation, and liberty of women, in the church and in the world. For this reason I hold that feminism is principally *political*: it is the “longest revolution,” and remakes family, culture, ethos. (For that reason, Professor Bennett is quite right to see my twinning of Divine Aseity and rejection of idolatry and abuse as feminist preoccupations.) Such a view relativizes language as a medium for the feminist cause. I do not mean to exclude it or deny the exacting and wide-ranging conceptual work done in linguistic analysis; but I do relativize it. The “linguistic turn” in humane letters has its limitations, I believe: the maxim “language shapes reality” is true only in part. It does not require a repudiation of the linguistic character of knowledge to say that language can be transformed by reality (I am a realist)—and it can also be emptied of concreteness, become trite, overused, and dog-eared; it can lose referential power; it can become a mere ornament, an abstract politeness. In my wing of feminism, words do not oppress; people and states do.

In my view, feminism, as it entered the doors of the academy, shed its political garb and put on a conceptual preoccupation with matters

of method, of linguistic troubles over meaning and referent, and gendered analyses of texts. These have their place! They are no more to be excluded than the careful historical and philological work Professor Moberly warmly recommends in biblical theology. But I believe they must be measured by, and serve the ends of, women's full humanity, for this too is ingredient in the righteous Reign of God. My aim is for women to claim the power of the pulpit, the fire of the Great Commission, and the power of the keys, the ordination of baptism, and the summons to write the liturgy, history, exegesis, and dogmatics of the church. We lay claim to the tradition; and we are its bearers. This I take to be the feminist expression of the Marxist vision (yes, I have Marxist leanings, too) that the high-cultural tradition of European letters becomes the property and instrument of the working class.

This is not the only vision of feminism or of its definition, surely; but it is, I believe, a cogent and powerful one. As a theologian I stand under the tradition, as do all Christians, I say; and as a woman, I stand under it as one who is at last authorized to represent it, to deepen it, if it be in my gift, and to proudly advance it. Language for God remains ingredient in this tradition, and I receive it gratefully. I aim to use this dogmatic language (masculine pronouns and titles) not as a species of the "grounding problem," but rather as scriptural words that in their frailty and earthiness show forth the Grandeur who is God. For this reason it is also entirely fitting to use the female imagery and language from the Wisdom tradition for Almighty God, and to conjoin it to the maternal imagery in Isaiah, in Jeremiah, and in the teaching of our Lord. And this may be emancipatory for some readers or worshipers, a great benefit. But the aim remains to stand within the church, to rest upon Holy Scripture, and to express the deliverances of the tradition, so as to build up the body of Christ, whose members are women and men. That this world may become God's Realm: this is the most radical demand that can be made in this sorry earth. Feminism, I say, belongs there, in this radical City of God. In this sense, I believe the whole of the systematic enterprise is a feminist work, and it may be for that reason that Professor Bennett, in her comparative survey, focuses on broad analytic categories in the doctrine of God as feminist preoccupations.

Let me now consider more fully the very proper queries Professor Moberly has raised about my handling and exegesis of Holy Scripture. He is quite right that I aim to unfold a metaphysical *visio Dei* out of the fathomless well of the Bible. And I want to do this

with the Old Testament and the confession of the people Israel at the very center of Christian proclamation. For this reason, Exodus 3 and Deuteronomy 6 form the sturdy backbone of the whole volume. Now I think there is no question that I could have benefited from further reading, study, and exegesis of the biblical theologians, Jewish and Christian, Professor Moberly cites. Judging from the material I have read from these biblical theologians, my work could only be enriched by reading further and deeper. (Brevard Childs is a cardinal instance, I would say.) I take Professor Moberly's example about *echad* and *heis* to heart: there is much in "oneness" within Holy Writ that could shape and guide my affirmation of the sheer Unicity of God. Nor do I wish to screen off the philological or cultural study of these ancient texts: to love the Bible is to long to know it all, to swallow it whole. But I want to think further here about the deeper challenge Professor Moberly raises for dogmatic theology of my kind. How can I read scripture as I do? And just what is this scripture that I believe I am leaning upon?

Holy Scripture, in my reckoning, is a *manifestation* of the Holy God, a kind of Theophany. I mean something rather stronger by this claim than the simple idea, true in itself, that scripture records God's presence to the earth. I mean, rather, that scripture as a whole, in both testaments, is the creature in which God is pleased to dwell, embedded in the words of the canon. (This I take to be a species of theological compatibilism in the domain of Holy Scripture.) The Bible, I say, is strongly unique: it bears God as does nothing else in the creaturely realm. As is Mary, so is the Bible *Theotokos*, but in a manner wholly germane to itself. Holy Scripture is *magistra*. The manifestation of the LORD in the burning bush is the key, within the canon of scripture itself, to the whole: the Fire who is God burns there and does not consume the text. This in part is what I mean when I say that in Holy Scripture, we meet God there. So, on my account, the Bible is not principally *about* God, though to be sure it is filled with teaching and description of the One God. The Bible, at heart and full scope, is an encounter with the God who tabernacles there. Now, this sounds a bit sacramental, and I would not want to exclude such associations; but I mean this not as an instance of a broader type but rather as a unique gift to the world, a verbal creature alive with God.

God's Presence in scripture will not be directly observable, however; it will not be laid down explicitly in the narrative, ordinance, poetry, and parable of this sacred text. We do not do with scripture what a Thomist would do with the eucharistic species: after consecration

the Thomist would say it is right to point to the species and say, "This is the body of Christ, born of Mary." I would not want to say that I point to the Bible and say, "This is God." There is not an "impanation" of the Word here, nor a transformation of some kind from substance to Substance. It is rather that, in a unique Creator-creature relation, the Bible carries within it the Personal Presence of God and manifests it to us, though under the earthen vessel of our own idiom. A theologian is invited, then, to seek after God in a particular and exacting manner when she or he turns to Holy Writ.

The whole of it can speak of God, God's very Aseity, in the explicit and obvious places but also in the obscure and deeply hidden. (In the draft of volume 2, on Trinitarian processions and missions, I attempt a reading of the Hexameron as manifesting, also, the Processional Life of God.) Such a reading has affinities with the medieval practice of spiritual interpretation of a passage, as well as a form of *lectio divina*. And in the end it must also absorb in a way distinctive to this view the traditional notion of God as Author of this text. (The Presence of God in Holy Scripture, that is, must be *personal*.) But I do not seek to conform Holy Scripture to the modern preoccupation with Revelation, either propositional or personal. Rather, the Bible is a *showing forth*, a wonder. We must turn aside to see it, leave our customary pathways. The Presence of God is *discerned* in the creaturely text; our eyes must be opened to it, our hearts set ablaze. To enter into this task is to read scripture theologically—or so I say.

Now, I think it would be entirely fitting for Professor Moberly to ask about constraints on such a florid reading of the Bible; indeed I take his careful defense of lower critical and biblical theological readings to be an urgent query over just such intellectual criteria. (I would not want to carry out an impressionistic, rhetorical, or unschooled reading of the Bible, or be seen as doing so. Holy Scripture deserves my best thought, analytic and structural.) It is no good saying "this is that," if there be no warrant for the claim, nor any evidence that could countermand it. (On this point I think Karl Popper is just right.) But the constraints will be appropriate to the very odd creature we have in our midst. I think it might be appropriate to consider "fit" a constraint on reading: the doctrine of God that we spy in scripture must agree broadly with the pattern of God's working, and with the confession of Israel and the church about Almighty God. Peter Lombard says that the species of the eucharist are "analogous" to the *res* of their working: bread as the sustaining of life; Christ as the Food, come down

from heaven. He does not have in mind the full armature of later Scholastic and early modern notions of analogy, but rather something like fittingness. The words that bear Divine Presence have some such fit with the God who designates them as His dwelling, and we can expect that any theological reading of scripture will fit into the broad pattern of Israel's faithfulness and the church's testimony.

We might expect, too, that the witness and deeds of the saints will constrain and guide our reading; we will expect too that the readings of previous doctors of the church will correct and instruct us. The history of spiritual interpretation suggested that a hidden meaning would be correlated always with a manifest reading at another place in the text. That is a fine overarching ideal, I agree; but rather too confident, I would say. I think there is something much closer to a loose coherence, a plausibility and persuasiveness that accords with broad scriptural themes and with other churchly reading and practice. This is not a foundational epistemic claim, that is, but one born of the benign circle of life in the Christian faith. We seek to have our hearts burning within us as we turn to this text, to encounter the living God of Israel and the church there, and to come before His Presence. This I take to be the aim of the prayer that we "hear, read, learn, mark and inwardly digest" the Holy Scriptures. It does not ignore scholarship, it prizes it; but a theological reading of the Bible aims also to discern and hear, to encounter and answer to the God who dwells in these pages. I hear St. Augustine reading scripture in this way, and I hope in some small measure to trace again that outline in my own dogmatic reading of the sacred page.

Professors MacDougall, Bennett, and Moberly have allowed me to think further, with them, of the proper shape and direction of a doctrine of God in our era. The questions that they have raised for me are just the ones that a theologian in this season of the church's life should hear and answer. They will be lasting questions for me, ones to carry into further volumes. I do not think I have given them full answer here, but some light has been shed on them, perhaps, and a conversation begun. For these, and for many things, I am grateful.