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978-1-107-01028-4 - Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition

Kevin W. Hector

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Theology without Metaphysics

One of the central arguments of post-metaphysical theology is that language is inherently “metaphysical,” and consequently that it shoehorns objects into predetermined categories. Because God is beyond such categories, it follows that language cannot apply to God.

Drawing on recent work in theology and philosophy of language, Kevin W. Hector develops an alternative account of language and its relation to God, demonstrating that one need not choose between fitting God into a metaphysical framework, on the one hand, and keeping God at a distance from language, on the other. Hector thus elaborates a “therapeutic” response to metaphysics: given the extent to which metaphysical presuppositions about language have become embedded in common sense, he argues that metaphysics can be fully overcome only by defending an alternative account of language and its application to God, of such a kind as to strip such presuppositions of their apparent self-evidence and release us from their grip.

KEVIN W. HECTOR is Assistant Professor of Theology and of the Philosophy of Religions at the University of Chicago Divinity School. His essays have appeared in *Modern Theology*, *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, *Journal of Religion*, and *Expository Times*.

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Preface

I regularly encounter persons who think it is self-evident that language is inherently metaphysical, that it therefore shoehorns objects into a predetermined framework and so inflicts violence upon them, and that it must accordingly be kept at a distance from God. I have never been convinced that this is the case, much less that it is *self-evidently* the case. This book argues that there is good reason to resist such a view, since there is reason to think that language is not – or need not be thought to be – metaphysical. If I am right about this, the book should contribute to current discussions of theological language as well as of metaphysics. That is my hope, at any rate.

This project began as a dissertation written at Princeton Seminary, and I am grateful to Gordon Graham, George Hunsinger, Wentzel van Huyssteen, Bruce McCormack, Daniel Migliore, and Jeffrey Stout for their invaluable help with it. McCormack and Stout deserve special recognition, since whatever theological and philosophical skill I have is due largely to them. I was blessed to have been mentored by two professors who are not only among the best in the world at what they do, but who earnestly care about – and root for – their students.

The dissertation has since been rewritten from the ground up; hardly a sentence of the original remains. For their contributions to this effort, I owe a debt of thanks to my (current and former) colleagues at the University of Chicago, especially Dan Arnold, Curtis Evans, Dwight Hopkins, Jean-Luc Marion, William Schweiker, and Kathryn Tanner, and to members of the Race and Religion Workshop and my Theology and Metaphysics seminar, especially Jason Cather,

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Julius Crump, and Bryce Rich. I am likewise grateful to Steve Bush, David DeCosimo, Rick Elgendy, Keith Johnson, Bruce Marshall, Lisa Powell, Joseph Steinger, and Ted Vial for their comments on earlier drafts. The finished product is much improved for their help.

Special thanks are also due to my editors at Cambridge, Laura Morris and Iain Torrance. They have been as kind as they have been helpful, and I am grateful for their good work.

Chapters 2 and 6 contain revised versions of material previously published as “The Mediation of Christ’s Normative Spirit: A Constructive Reading of Schleiermacher’s Pneumatology,” in *Modern Theology* 24:1 (2008); “Attunement and Explication: A Pragmatist Reading of Schleiermacher’s ‘Theology of Feeling,’” in *Schleiermacher, the Study of Religion, and the Future of Theology*, Brent Sockness and Wilhelm Gräb (eds.) (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010); and “Grappling with Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*,” Review of *A Secular Age*, by Charles Taylor, *Journal of Religion* 90:3 (July 2010). I am grateful to the editors of *Modern Theology*, Walter de Gruyter, and *Journal of Religion* for their permission to reuse this material.

Finally, like everything else I do, the writing of this book was bound up with the life I share with my family. My son Simeon was born the day after I turned in my dissertation, and my daughter Anastasia a week after I finished rewriting it. They have been a blessing to me in countless ways, among which I would include (nowhere near the top of the list) their providing me with an endless supply of test cases with which to assess my claims about language. My wife Krista, meanwhile, has been an inexhaustible source of encouragement and support, joyfully and effortlessly given, as well as a reliable touchstone by which to test my philosophical and theological intuitions. She has been my constant champion, and I dedicate this book to her.