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978-1-107-40557-8 - Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

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Remythologizing Theology

The rise of modern science and the proclaimed “death” of God in the nineteenth century led to a radical questioning of divine action and authorship – Bultmann’s celebrated “demythologizing”. *Remythologizing Theology* moves in another direction that begins by taking seriously the biblical accounts of God’s speaking. It establishes divine communicative action as the formal and material principle of theology, and suggests that interpersonal dialogue, rather than impersonal causality, is the keystone of God’s relationship with the world. This original contribution to the theology of divine action and authorship develops a new vision of Christian theism. It also revisits several long-standing controversies such as the relations of God’s sovereignty to human freedom, time to eternity, and suffering to love. Groundbreaking and thought-provoking, it brings theology into fruitful dialogue with philosophy, literary theory, and biblical studies.

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER is Blanchard Professor of Theology at Wheaton College Graduate School (IL). He is the author of *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Cambridge, 1990), *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (1998) and *The Drama of Doctrine* (2005).

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The deist represents this being [God] merely as a cause of the world ... the theist as the Author of the world.

– Immanuel Kant

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.

– Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* vol. v, pp. 213–14

Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not; As thou hast been thou for ever wilt be.

– Thomas O. Chisholm, "Great is thy Faithfulness"

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God's still in his heaven, but (with apologies to Robert Browning) all's not yet right with the world. Moreover, in modern times the *doctrine* of God has been in a deep funk; this despite encouraging signs that a number of theologians have finally cleared their throats (to use Jeffrey Stout's metaphor for mucking about in methodology) and begun to speak of God. And just in time, for as Jürgen Moltmann observes: "It is simple, but true, to say that theology has only one, single problem: *God*."¹ God is "the future of theology,"² just as he is its past and present. While God transcends time, however, the doctrine of God does not.

There is no more powerful name to drop than that of God, especially in the midst of discussion concerning proper social values. "God" is the ultimate ideological warrant. But what is God's name and what does "God" mean? There are theologies "of" hope, art, literature, music, work, marriage, sex, play, liberation, etc. in which the theme in question overshadows God. The adjective "theological" is similarly promiscuous: ethics, method, imagination, science, education, etc. are all "theological" yet, here too, God typically remains off-stage, a notional rather than operative concept.³ I am as guilty as anyone of procrastinating in the prolegomenal fields. In *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*⁴ I tilled the textual ground with small conceptual

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and the Future of the Modern World* (Pittsburgh: ATS, 1995), p. 1.

2. Miroslav Volf, "Introduction," in Miroslav Volf (ed.), *The Future of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), p. xvii.

3. I am indebted to Mark Bowald for this way of framing the problem.

4. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998).

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tools (e.g., speech acts) and heavy hermeneutical equipment (e.g., Paul Ricoeur). I buttressed my hermeneutical approach by calling it “theological,” but the appeal was too cavalier.

The present work, an essay in aid of the development of the doctrine of God, puts metaphysical muscle behind my adjectival qualifier by explicating what to this point has been only implicit: who/what God *is*. We speak well of God, however, only because God has first spoken to us, given us his name. The interpersonal dialogue between God and human beings that the Bible not only depicts but instantiates is the privileged starting point for Christian theology.⁵ My project thus begins with what Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing too hastily dismisses: God’s speaking, self-naming, and acting communicatively in the covenant history and Scripture of Israel that culminates in Jesus Christ and his church.

“Authorship” – a convenient shorthand for the notion of verbal communicative action – thus serves as a controlling metaphor whose conceptual elaboration makes the theological way straight. Three further observations support this hunch. First, the concept of *communicatio* shows up in diverse doctrinal places: theology proper (e.g., the so-called “communicable” vs. “incommunicable” divine attributes), christology (e.g., the *communicatio idiomatum*), and ecclesiology (i.e., “communicants,” in the context of participants in the Lord’s Supper). Second, Western theologians as diverse as Thomas Aquinas, John Owen, Karl Rahner, and Karl Barth freely employ the notions of communication and self-communication in the contexts of divine revelation and/or redemption, yet usually without explicit analysis. Finally, few theologians have made use of the available linguistic, philosophical, literary, and rhetorical resources conceptually to elaborate the nature of God’s communicative action.

I made some initial forays along these lines in my *First Theology*.⁶ Whereas Aristotle identified metaphysics as “first philosophy,” I dubbed theological hermeneutics – that complex problematic involving the intersection of God, Scripture, and human understanding – “first theology.” The Bible is God’s instrument for doing revelatory

5. See ch. 1 for some examples. Cf. W. Norris Clarke, who takes interpersonal dialogue as the privileged starting point of metaphysics. See his *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being – God – Person* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), ch. 2.

6. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

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and redemptive things with words in the context of the church. It is one thing to say that the doctrine of God is implicated in one's hermeneutic, however, and quite another to explicate it. The recent interest in theological hermeneutics, together with the church's recovery of the practice of interpreting the Bible in the context of God's triune activity, welcome though these be, must be matched by an equal attention to the nature of the God of whose communicative activity the Bible is an ingredient.

In *The Drama of Doctrine* I sought to match the method of theology more closely to its matter.⁷ Christianity is fundamentally neither a philosophy nor a system of morality but a theodrama, a *doing* in which God gets the most important speaking and acting part. Here too, my gestures towards the notion of God as "triune communicative agent" stopped short of unpacking its implicit ontology. It was nevertheless encouraging to see just how well the notion of communicative action fit in a theodramatic model, for "the particular vocation of the theatre is to explore the consequences of this intuition that 'to say is to do' and 'to do is to say'."⁸ Doctrine gives direction for right participation in the theodrama, but ultimately doctrine is not a matter of what works but of what *befits* the way things – God, the world, oneself – are. To define doctrine in terms of fitting participation in the drama of redemption is already to locate theology in the borderlands of ontology.

Ontology is "the sustained attempt to provide a systematic account of the concepts used in discussion concerning any subject-matter."⁹ At the heart of Christian theology, says Donald MacKinnon, "there lies the continual interpenetration of dramatic and ontological."¹⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr concurs: "The Bible conceives life as a drama in which human and divine actions create the dramatic whole. There are ontological presuppositions for this drama, but they are not spelled out."¹¹ The task of the present work is to explore the ontology of the one whose speech and acts propel the theodrama forward.

7. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

8. Ross Chambers, "Le Masque et le Miroir: Vers une théorie relationnelle du théâtre," *Etudes littéraires* 13 (1980), p. 402.

9. Peter Geach, as cited by Donald M. MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology: The Three-Fold Cord* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), p. 73.

10. MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology*, p. 234.

11. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation in Tillich's Theology," in Charles Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds.), *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, vol. I (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 216–29; here, 216.

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This volume sets forth a communicative ontology (i.e., a set of concepts with which to speak of God-in-communicative-action) and sketches the contours of a theodramatic metaphysics (i.e., a biblically derived set of concepts with which to speak of the whole of created reality). Its deepest wish is to complete Paul Ricoeur's "second Copernican Revolution" that dethrones the autonomous knowing subject in order to hearken to the one whose creative word forms, informs, and transforms us. As others have noted, Ricoeur's work opens up new possibilities for hermeneutics, biblical interpretation, and theological method.¹² Yet neither Ricoeur nor those who stand on his shoulders have given much attention to the doctrine of God, either to the question of divine action in general or to the doctrine of the Trinity in particular. The present work sets out to remove the phenomenological brackets (to the divine things themselves!), take off the hermeneutical gloves, and engage in bare-handed (but not, I trust, ham-fisted) theo-ontology.¹³ The result: a communicative theism that stakes a claim to the mantle of Trinitarian theology picked up by certain relational theists and panentheists after Karl Barth set it down.

Some readers will no doubt regard this entire project as a retrograde development: theology has been there, done that. One of the most explosive theological proposals of the twentieth century, Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God*, argued that theism must go, for "there is no room for [God], not merely in the inn, but in the entire universe."¹⁴ The ideas that God is "up there" or "out there" are to Robinson's mind equally idolatrous, for God is not a supernatural entity or "highest person" that can be said to exist as do other items in the universe.¹⁵

12. See Dan R. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

13. I use the term "ontology" in reference to the being of particular things, and "metaphysics" in reference to systems of categories that may be applied to things in general. Accordingly, ontology comes to resemble the project of the "exegesis" of being, and metaphysics appears as the discipline that provides hermeneutical schemes for such exegesis. Whether or not a given "metaphysics" is oppressive or reductionist depends on whether it is serving a ministerial (i.e., descriptive) or magisterial (i.e., legislative) purpose. The present book attempts a ministerial metaphysics that serves faith's search for understanding the self-presentation of the triune God.

14. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest To God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 13–14.

15. Robinson approvingly cites Tillich's claim that "the protest of atheism against such a highest person is correct" (*Honest to God*, p. 41).

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Those who would be honest to God must strive to avoid both pride and sloth in their God-talk. Theological pride overestimates the adequacy of human language and thought; theological sloth underestimates the importance of responding to the provocations of God's self-revelation. The one goes before destruction; the other pre-empts instruction. Yet it is hard to miss the recurring biblical theme that God wills to communicate and make himself known: "The word of the Lord came to ..."; "the Lord said ...". Theology is ultimately irresponsible if it fails either to attend to what God says or to think about the nature of the one who addresses us.

Three years after the publication of *Honest to God* Donald MacKinnon weighed in with an essay of his own: "Can a Divinity Professor Be Honest?"¹⁶ Christian pilgrims emerging from the valley of the shadow of deconstruction are more aware than ever of how one's situatedness can distort one's speech, regardless of one's sincerity. MacKinnon's humility is in this light brave and bracing, especially when it leads him to interrogate his own metaphysical machinations by confronting them with the stubborn particularity of tragedy and evil. Self-inspection is nowhere near as effective, however, as exposing oneself to the rigors of honest conversation. The shortest route to dishonesty is that which avoids dialogue. Being honest to God ultimately requires humility and boldness, the antidotes to theological pride and theological sloth respectively and the necessary prerequisites for entering into constructive conversation.

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 ... The present book indicates a constructive way forward for the doctrine of God that thinks on whatever is true and pure in classical theism, Thomism, open theism, and various forms of panentheism. It avoids altogether, however, the broad North American highway that Christian Smith has dubbed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.¹⁷

16. Donald M. MacKinnon, "Can a Divinity Professor Be Honest?" *The Cambridge Review* 12 (1966), pp. 94–6.

17. Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

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My wager is that we will come to a better understanding of God's being by examining biblical accounts of God's communicative action (i.e., naming, promising, declaring, etc.). *The focal point in what follows is the nature of the relationship established by the dialogical interaction between God and humanity and its implications for the doctrine of God.* The notion of communicative action throws new light on a host of theological issues, including the relation of divine sovereignty and human freedom, divine eternity and human time, divine immutability and human change. The divine-human dialogical relation raises questions that penetrate into the heart of the doctrine of God: Is God solely an agent or can God be affected by human discourse and, if so, how? If Jesus is the Word of God whose own people received him not (Jn. 1:11), is triune communicative action consequently at the mercy of human communicative respondents? Can human obtuseness frustrate God? In the light of these questions, the present book may be viewed as working a communicative variation on the doctrine of divine impassibility.¹⁸ The issue of God's suffering – whether, what, when, and how – is an excellent litmus test for where a theologian stands when he or she is being honest to God.

Can *this* divinity professor be honest? To attend to MacKinnon's interrogative voice is to be reminded that one tell tale sign of dishonest theology is an incapacity for conversation.¹⁹ Conversely, to admit the provisionality of one's own monological musings is to acknowledge the need for dialogue, and for keeping silent in order to hear what is being said.²⁰ The present work is consequently all about voices – literal and metaphorical, biblical and theological, human and divine – and their ongoing interaction.

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. The rumor of angels is nothing next to the clamor

18. The doctrine of divine impassibility, an important part of the orthodox tradition, asserts that God does not suffer the effects of time or creaturely causation.

19. So John McDowell, "Donald MacKinnon on Why an Honest Theology Cannot Stand Still," http://www.geocities.com/johnnymcdowell/An_Honest_Theology_MacKinnon.htm.

20. On the importance of silence for a proper understanding of communicative action, see Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). I return to this point in ch. 9.

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of the academics, however, and a number of voices from different disciplines and traditions have duly elbowed their way into the conversation. These voices too, from alternative perspectives, help keep the theologian honest to God. I have benefited from imagining conversations between thinkers whose divergent disciplines or theological traditions typically make for dialogues of the deaf. What original contribution this book might make stems, in the final analysis, from my following that still but persistent voice that has for some years now impressed upon me the formal and material importance for Christian theology of triune communicative action: God's voice, God's word, God's breath.

I am grateful for communication with the following persons whose voices, present or recalled, frequently interrupted me throughout the process of writing to interrogate, encourage, and correct. Thanks to Gary Badcock, Bruce McCormack, John Webster, and Stephen Williams for their valued electronic correspondence at key moments in the argument's development. Conversations with Graham Cole and Michael Allen were also of great value in the formative and concluding stages of the project respectively. Cole brought the important work of W. Norris Clarke to my attention and so helped me respond to my friend Philip Clayton's shrewd query with regard to *The Drama of Doctrine* concerning the location of its "metaphysical beef." I owe a special word of thanks to Dan Treier for his willingness to read and make valuable comments on every chapter, and for phrasing his harshest criticisms with delicate pastoral tact.

I am also pleased to acknowledge the contribution of several of my current and former Ph.D. students: from the University of Edinburgh, Ken Gavel; from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Mary Baker, Ray Degenkolb, Steve Garrett, Adam Johnson, Eric Kimn, Jonathan (JK) King, Kiem Le, Hans Madueme, Jules Martinez, Sadrac Meza, Joice Pang, Ben Peays, Michael Sleasman, John Song, Armida Stephens, Nimai Suna, and Natee Tanchanpongs. In a series of occasional meetings, they turned the tables on their supervisor, offering comments and criticisms on a number of draft chapters. I am particularly happy to thank my two daughters for their respective contributions as well: listening to Mary playing piano in the background (ah, Medtner!) provided a felicitous backdrop for writing about divine communication; meanwhile, Emma cheerfully performed the

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tedious task of proof-reading and critiquing a first draft during a six-week period of house arrest (i.e., summer vacation).

A word of special thanks must go to Kate Brett and Gillian Dadd of Cambridge University Press. They exemplified the patient endurance of God that is the subject of the present book as they waited for it and seasoned our e-mail correspondence with such down-to-earth matters as gardening and impending motherhood. I am also very grateful to David Ford for his concise yet insightful comments on an earlier draft. His interaction with my text exemplified Christian wisdom and charity and enabled me to improve the manuscript in places that I might have otherwise overlooked. I, of course, am solely responsible for all remaining faults.

Among the many voices that continue to echo over the years, those of one's best teachers figure most prominently. It is therefore fitting that I dedicate the present work to John Frame, my first graduate school theology professor, a master-pedagogue and triangulator extraordinaire, whose multi-perspectival approach to the doctrine of God has been a source of continuing inspiration. As a scholar, he exemplifies sanctified erudition in engaging other positions with charitable criticism; as a saint, he personifies a compelling model of how to do theology with creative fidelity while remaining boldly yet humbly honest to God.