

Reviews of Books

Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship, Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xix + 539 pages, £75, ISBN: 978-0521470124

This is the first major volume from Kevin Vanhoozer not devoted, in one way or another, to questions of method—he describes himself as having been guilty of ‘procrastinating in the prolegomenal fields’ (xii). It has been worth the wait. Following extensive treatment of theological methodology in *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), he has begun to put serious legs on that proposal, showing us what dogmatics in Vanhoozerian vein looks like.

Remythologizing Theology offers us Vanhoozer’s account of the doctrine of God. It is not a comprehensive exposition of God’s being, attributes, and triunity, but is nevertheless wide-ranging in scope, with well-chosen subjects that get to the heart of a number of contemporary debates. Vanhoozer states his goal as ‘to lay out the contours of a theodramatic metaphysics whose categories derive from descriptions of God’s word-acts, and to bring this account into dialogue with other forms of theism.’ (32) In particular, he sets himself against the panentheisms of, *inter alia*, Moltmann, process theology, and the open theists.

The book is in three parts. Part One is exploratory, sampling some significant biblical texts before laying out and evaluating the theologies with which Vanhoozer will take issue with his own proposal. Part Two outlines that proposal, a Trinitarian ‘communicative theism’ that ‘retools’ classical theism by leaning on communicative rather than causal categories. Part Three applies this to the God-world, particularly the God-human, relation, exploring divine sovereignty, human freedom, evil, and prayer. He concludes

with two chapters on divine (im)passibility and compassion. In all this, the relationship of God and creatures is cast in a 'theodramatic' model, with God as Author and humans as heroes of the play.

Vanhoozer styles his account post-Barthian Thomism. Thomist because, following recent accounts of Aquinas's theology (e.g., Fergus Kerr, Thomas Weinandy), God is no static entity; he is eternally, fully realized being-in-act. Post-Barthian because rather than dealing in categories of being per se, he more explicitly allows the plot of Scripture to shape his proposal, focusing on God as an eternally communicative agent. Thus, rather than speaking of God as being-in-act, he prefers to talk of God's being-in-communicative-act. Taking a broad definition of communication, as far more than transmission of information, and utilizing speech-act theory, he argues that 'No activity is as characteristic, or as frequently mentioned in the Bible, as God's speaking.' (212)

Throughout, Vanhoozer makes extensive use of covenantal categories and biblical theology. As one of the leading figures in the contemporary revival of the theological exegesis of Scripture, he interacts fruitfully and insightfully with Scripture; one of the side benefits of the volume was a number of exegetical insights as he expounded a wide range of biblical texts in their canonical interconnectedness. All of this is in keeping with the title of the work. 'Remythologizing', as well as evoking, though not raising, the ghost of Bultmann, refers to the *mythos* of Scripture, where *mythos*, following Aristotle, refers to dramatic plot. That is, in accounting for the Who and What of God, Vanhoozer seeks to be governed by the plot of God's Scriptural self-revelation, particularly, though far from exclusively, as it reaches its climax in the person and work of Christ.

Vanhoozer's proposal, method, and conclusions have many strengths. Not least is the way he repeatedly brings the Creator-creature distinction to the fore. This highlights the asymmetry in God's relationship with us, and emphasizes the importance of analogical language in our talk of God. Related to this, he deals what should be a death blow to Feuerbachian projections of human relationships, community, love, reciprocity, suffering, onto God—what he terms 'Feuerbachian slips', and which he finds theologians such as Moltmann and Pinnock guilty of. God is the Lordly Creator; for every likeness between him and us, there is a far greater

unlikeness. His love is a Lordly love, a love that endures and conquers suffering, rather than becoming passively subject to it. Similarly, although he invites us into dialogue, it is never the dialogue of equals. When we pray, we are always creatures, actors in the play answering the prior word of the Author.

Vanhoozer's desire to be Scriptural is also related to his refutation of Feuerbachian strategies. Perhaps the foundational strength of this volume is that Vanhoozer is confident that God has spoken and we should listen. He has revealed himself not only in his mighty acts in history, but also, and vitally, in his words about those acts. He is known not only in his Son in a reductionistic way, but also in the covenant history that the Son brings to its climax and fulfilment.

Vanhoozer also does well to put the Trinity front and centre in his account of God's being and attributes. There is no hint of dealing with the One God prior to consideration of his triunity. However, in contrast to some currents in contemporary trinitarianism, he distinguishes the immanent and economic Trinity, refusing to collapse the immanent into the economic, such that God becomes dependent on the world. God's words and acts in the economy reveal who he is in himself, but do not constitute his being. One specific proposal that merits careful thought is the way in which this trinitarianism shapes Vanhoozer's account of God's eternity and relationship to time. His emphasis on triune communicative relationships, rather than only relations of origin (begetting, spirating), in the immanent Trinity means that rather than regarding eternity as bare timelessness (or as eternal time), he sees it as the space in which God enjoys ceaseless communicative activity. It is the medium of the fully realized (and so immutable, but not static) communication of love between Father, Son, and Spirit. These ordered relationships within God's eternal life provide an analogue to the successive flow of created time, the space in which God communicatively relates with creatures (253-4).

Finally, given its centrality to Vanhoozer's thesis, we should note his defence of divine impassibility, which is nuanced, Scripturally derived, and Christologically-focused, affirming that God has strong affections, but is not passively acted upon. Space prevents an exposition of his view here; suffice to say that he brings much needed conceptual clarity to the definitions of suffering and emotions, and to

considering how God's relationship to sin, suffering, and evil contrasts with ours.

In a work of this size and scope, any reader will, of course, have a number of niggles and questions. I see one significant weakness, at least viewed from the perspective of a pastor theologian. It is hard not to be dazzled, and often charmed, by Vanhoozer's virtuosity with language. The text is full of artful puns and allusions, and newly minted vocabulary. To give a far from exhaustive list: being-in-communicative-act, Feuerbachian slips, kyriotic (as compared with kenotic) compassion, remythologizing, theodramatic, theo-ontology (as compared with ontotheology). Some of these are not entirely unique to Vanhoozer, but none are common coin. Many will be familiar to those in the know as witty variations upon the themes of other writers. But unless you are already familiar with ontotheology, for example, this might prove rather heavy going.

This is not to say Vanhoozer does not write well; his prose is often elegant, sometimes brilliant. Nevertheless, sentences like 'God's compassion is a covenantal concern-based theodramatic construal' (443, cf. 464) do not appear calculated to invite the more timid reader into the conceptual world Vanhoozer is constructing. It is unfair to cite all of these out of context. He does a good job of explaining his terms, technical terminology is, to some degree, unavoidable, and one or two examples would not hinder communication unduly. But the cumulative effect is that this is an enjoyable, but also an unnecessarily difficult, reading experience.

In fairness to Vanhoozer, in this volume he is writing mainly for fellow academics, in a prestigious series for a university press; he has two more popular volumes forthcoming where he will summarize his more academic works. Nevertheless, he *is* also intentionally writing theology for the church, theology with pastoral relevance. This is a major theme in *The Drama of Doctrine*, where he argues that doctrine is a practical discipline, aimed at right living. However, I fear that what he gives with his right hand, he then partially takes away with his left. Pleasing as his linguistic virtuosity is, I suspect that it hinders accessibility. If this theology is to help the church (which, if absorbed, preached, and lived, it will), it must be accessible to busy pastors who may be willing to continue learning, but lack the time or breadth of reading to benefit fully from what Vanhoozer has to say. In short, I

suspect that in choosing to write like this, Vanhoozer loses clarity and accessibility for many, without necessarily gaining in depth.

These criticisms should not, however, detract from Vanhoozer's accomplishment. This is a conceptually rich, Scripturally faithful, theologically edifying account of a subject more important than which cannot be conceived. If we agree, as we should, with Eberhard Jüngel, that God is interesting in and for himself, and with Augustine that nowhere is error more dangerous, inquiry more laborious, or discovery of the truth more profitable than in considering the Holy Trinity, we can be deeply grateful to Professor Vanhoozer for working hard himself, and making us work hard, in order to serve up a profoundly interesting and rewarding account of the God who lives and loves in eternal communicative act.

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Can God be Free? William L. Rowe. Oxford: Clarendon, 2004. 173 pages, £24.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-920412-0

This study addresses the 'problems concerning [God's] *freedom* and *praiseworthiness* in relation to his *perfect goodness*' (2). Particularly it examines the question of whether God is compelled to create the best possible world. This may seem an abstruse question to many Christians, but it has two important ramifications. First, it affects our view of the character of God and his creation and, second, it ripples out into the wider debates around predestination. If God himself does not have the libertarian type of freedom which Arminianism would claim for humanity, why should that definition of freedom be so central to human nature?

The author is a professor of philosophy, and this book is a work of philosophy rather than theology. It is framed firmly within the Christian tradition, but lacks any engagement with Scripture. It is also highly specialised, and so will not appeal to many busy pastors, though there is much of value for those who will invest in it. Rowe examines his question mostly through four Christian writers. It is no coincidence that all four may be considered philosophers as well as