

Brief responses to my interlocutors

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First let me say how grateful I am to all my respondents, for the care and charity with which they have read my work. I thank them all for the time and energy they have given to their task. In what follows I do not intend to counter-respond in any way defensively, because each of the points they raise is well taken. Indeed, between them they have covered almost all of the points of criticism that I regularly hear when people first read me; and in some ways I must admit that I deliberately provoke such criticisms in order to engender further thought. However, let me provide just one paragraph of appreciative response to each of my critics in turn:

Antje Jackelén. This is a very discerning critique of my lecture. I do want to stress, however, that Bishop Jackelén is right to say that we have a lot in common in our approaches – perhaps more than is obvious from the one lecture she is here responding to. In particular, my work has been marked by a distinct commitment to interdisciplinarity, including recent interlocutions with medical and biological science. Perhaps what is confusing, then, is that I resist the (still common) presumption that such an engagement in interdisciplinarity necessarily leads to a ‘liberal’ dilution of doctrinal content, or a selling out to secular metaphysical tenets of thought. Secondly, I know I risk misunderstanding (perhaps this is where I most provocatively ‘trail my coat’) when I use the term ‘*totale*’ to describe my theological method; many are my readers who have begged me to drop this term! But the provocation is quite intentional, and also paradoxically related to an equally strong theme in my theology: that of the ‘apophatic qualifier’ of any method which is committed to the always-disturbing practices of silent attention. Remember that I insist that my method is just as much an ‘unsystematic systematics’ as it is a ‘*théologie totale*’. The reason I cling to the latter term, however, is to remind the reader of two things which tend to get forgotten in our current post-modern theological and philosophical milieu: 1. that coherence of vision is always that to which the systematician must aim, however diverted

and redirected s/he may be by constant pneumatological ‘interruptions’; and 2. that systematic theology, far from being ‘totalizing’ in the hegemonic sense, aims to dig down the messy tell of doctrine’s earthed enactments, there to encounter both heterodox or abusive enactments, on the one hand, and/or buried spiritual treasure otherwise ignored by drily academic theology, on the other. Recall here that I originally borrowed the term ‘*théologie totale*’ from the parallel ‘archeological’ intentions of the *Annales* school of historiography (*l’histoire totale*). Finally, Bishop Jackelén is very right to press her point about whether such a method as mine is suitable for the (secular) university, or whether it can be practised at all by non-believers or non-Christians. I take this issue very seriously and it demands a careful answer. But let me first point out that when we train ‘theologians’ in the university, we initially spend most of our time doing a second-order enterprise which largely consists of ‘talking about talking about God’ (‘theologology’, as the Dutch Jesuit Joep van Beeck has called it). And indeed some theologians (including many very fine ones) do that for most or even all of their careers. Moreover, this second-order discourse overlaps with, and to some extent animates, the ‘systematic’ task, proper. But that *real* systematic task, I insist, is always in some sense a proposal for life – a complete vision into which one is asking the reader to step and to ‘taste and see’; and it is a weird modern aberration, in my view, that systematic theologians can be written that somehow pretend they are not doing such.

Can non-believers or non-Christians join in this discussion? Absolutely: this sort of systematic theology invites criticism and – if it disturbs or annoys – that does not mean that it itself is not open to being disturbed or annoyed (see above). Finally, if offence is caused in the ‘secular’ university that some ‘practice’ should be seen as intrinsically related to an academic undertaking, here I can only point to such supposedly-uncontroversial parallel ‘practices’ as sports training in degrees in sport, acting in degrees in

theatre and English literature, and the undertaking of practical experiments in almost all branches of science. Again, it is only a modern regnant secularism that has marginalized or suppressed the integration of thought and practice in philosophy and theology (on this see the insightful work of Pierre Hadot on ancient pagan philosophy); and it is a mistaken picture of religious belief – much put about by contemporary atheism – that such belief is necessarily authoritarian and inflexible, incapable of academic rigour and self-critical reflection. I say: we must expose and resist these presumptions, not pander to them!

Philip Geister, S.J. Again, this is a sympathetic and insightful reading, linking my thought creatively to that of Ignatius Loyola; and I really only have one short point of clarification to make in response to Fr. Geister. That is: as becomes much more apparent in the first volume of my systematics as a whole than is evident in this one lecture (which forms an early chapter), I take it as axiomatic that prayer is *essentially* corporate, because it is made possible in and through the Holy Spirit, who gathers us ever more deeply into the realm of Christ's suffering and redeeming incarnate life. Therefore, although when we first start to pray on our own (and particularly in silence) such prayer may seem at times both lonely and frightening, as one matures in the life of prayer one comes to understand that prayer is in fact the *least* lonely or individualistic thing one does, linking us as it does – most mysteriously and deeply – to all those whom we meet but also to many whom we may only ever meet in another life. (Sometimes we get glimpses of this, but only fleetingly). Outside my systematics, mainly in homilies and sermons, I have written of prayer as both humanly 'impossible' (because really done by the Spirit: see again Romans 8. 26), and also humanly 'unbearable' (because most deeply conjoined to the suffering and redemptive work of Christ: see Mark 14. 36). In short, we can only pray at all because we are stepping into a *divine* conversation always already in process, one which links heaven and earth vertically and all the 'saints' horizontally. I think Fr. Geister and I really agree about this, and it is my fault in this particular lecture for not making this corporate element clearer. However, there is a remaining, adjunct, point on

which we perhaps do not quite agree. For I remain puzzled that Fr. Geister would want to drive a wedge between 'acting' and 'theological thinking' (p. 21) in looking for the effects of prayer in a person's life. It is precisely because I insist that these two *cannot* be disjoined in a '*théologie totale*' that I insist on the importance of prayer for both ethics and theology; whereas here Fr. Geister seems to me to reflect once more that tragic disjunction that had indeed already occurred by the time of Ignatius Loyola – between academic theology on the one hand, and prayer-and-action-for-life on the other. In a writer contemporary to Ignatius, John of the Cross, who is much more strongly informed by scholastic Thomism, and yet brilliantly reworks it in integration with his theory of spiritual development, we get a different kind of model to which I am – I must admit – personally much more attuned.

Anne-Louise Eriksson and Jonna Bornemark. Perhaps I may respond to these two respondents to *Powers and Submissions* together, because they represent two different generations of feminist scholarship and, as such, are interestingly contrastive. To Dr. Eriksson I think I can only repeat that the view of 'power' that she takes for granted ('It is *always* about one party's will holding sway over another party ... a zero-sum game') is precisely one that I wish to query and complexify throughout my book; and that the accompanying perception of Christian tradition as hopelessly and thoroughlygoingly 'androcentric' is equally what I wish to contest. If I held so dismal a perception of Christianity and its liberating capacities I should long ago have left the church! The feminist project, for me, involves the careful sorting of distinctions between *different* types of 'powers' (divine and human) and *different* types of 'submissions'; and whilst I agree entirely with Dr. Eriksson that the word 'submission' always comes with danger for women (making that particular word anathema to her), it is the capacity to keep a hermeneutics of suspicion balanced by a hermeneutics of charity and hope that sustains my belief that Christianity can yet be purged of patriarchal idolatry. And I am intrigued to see that Dr. Eriksson at least partly agrees with me when she admits to the importance of a 'secret love life' language

reserved for *God alone*. Still, I wonder why she reserves this for the ‘private’ realm, when surely a fundamental feminist principle is that ‘the personal *is* the political’? Jonna Bonnemark’s essay displays a rather different, and more fluid, set of presumptions on the crucial matter of power, and equally a more overt interest in rediscovering in the mystical traditions of Christianity a means of gender transformation. To that extent we are very much on the same page. The main point of critique she presents to me is that I fail to consider *kenosis* as intrinsic to the very nature of the divine, and to that I must plead guilty. (I have partially compensated for that omission in two more recent essays on *kenosis* – in ed. John Polkinghorne, *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (2001), and in ed. Stephen Evans, *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (2006)). The important point I stand by, however, is that there is a crucial difference between acknowledging that ‘Giving [is] ... God’s central power’ (here I am more than happy to agree with Jonna’s proposal), and moving from there to assert that ‘God is dependent upon man [*sic*]’, if by the latter is meant an actual *metaphysical* dependence leading to some sort of ‘process’ view of God. It is, I think, a complex hermeneutical matter whether some medieval or early modern ‘mystical theologians’ actually make this latter move. The reason I myself resist it is that it seems to me ultimately to remove the *sure* hope of transformation that the classical God of omnipotence holds out to us; in short, if I were a process theologian I fear I might be tempted to feel as gloomy as Anne-Louise about the ‘stuckness’ of Christianity in patriarchal sin! But note that there are ways in which Jonna’s sensitive reflections on ‘mirroring’ can be accommodated without an actual slide towards a process God. When Teresa of Avila, for instance, remarks somewhere (of our human responsibilities in relation to God): ‘He has no other hands but ours’, she is insisting on the mystical incorporation of our lives into the ongoing effects of the incarnation, *not* (as I read her) suggesting that we abandon the notion of divine omnipotence *tout court*. So everything depends here on how exactly one perceives the relation of human and divine in the incarnation – which is why I spilled so much ink, rather tediously I’m

afraid, on the technical problems of the hypostatic union in *Powers and Submissions*.

Jayne Svenungsson. Finally, let me add a note of appreciation for the feminist/theological comments by Dr. Svenungsson on *Pain and Its Transformations*. She does well here – echoing strands in Dr. Eriksson’s piece – to insist that no reflection on Christ’s pain should be divorced from a critical probing of the issue of whether a ‘sinister theology’ of mandated violence could be an accompaniment to it. But she is also careful to stress the dangers of a fateful *loss* of empathetic capacity if reflection on suffering is altogether repressed in feminist discourse. If I have a remaining difference with Dr. Svenungsson here it would be in my critical reading of the *earlier* work of René Girard, in which ‘sacrifice’ is represented as intrinsically violent and ‘scapegoating’. Ironically, Girard (whom Dr. Svenungsson cites approvingly) here seems to me to fall into a ‘sinister’ tendency himself; but this is a matter which takes us beyond the immediate discussion points of this symposium.¹ Let me thank all involved, once more, for their acute and searching readings of my recent work, from which I have learned a great deal.

¹ I am to take up these criticisms of Girard in my Cambridge inaugural lecture (forthcoming, October 13, 2009) entitled ‘Sacrifice Regained: Reconsidering the Rationality of Religious Belief’.