

# Cross, Contestation and Consummation: An Engagement with Ted Peters’ *God – The World’s Future*

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**Abstract:** The third edition of Peters’ systematic theology provides an opportunity to assess his contextual theology, descended from Tillich’s ‘method of correlation’, from the perspective of my own textual theology, descended from Karl Barth’s revelation theology, on the common ground of a shared Trinitarianism and positive retrieval of the twentieth-century’s rediscovery of the New Testament eschatology. The article affirms Peters’ sharply focused cognitive claim to truth about God as the world’s future, but asks a series of questions about how this claim is actually sustained in Peters’ capacious work. It concludes with the ‘apocalyptic’ judgement that Peters’ ‘progressive’ method is not fully adequate to the challenge of our present spiritual situation.

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Ted Peters and I share the conviction that if theology begins with the word given to thought, which is the gospel of the resurrection of the Crucified, we are led by it to the trinitarian understanding of God. The epistemically different ways that Peters and I pursue from this common point of departure might be succinctly designated as ‘critical realism’ on his side and ‘pragmatic perspectivalism’ on mine. Does the eschatological reading of the New Testament gospel which we share yield for us today a chastened but all the same progressive theology of history, as Peters delivers (or, at least, so it seems to me about half the time)? Or does it conduct us into the apocalyptic theology of the see-saw battle of the eons? And what difference would this difference make regarding the theological reading of our cultural situation today? It is a wonder. Let us look and see in the third edition of Peters’ systematic theology, *God – The World’s Future*.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Ted Peters, *God – The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, 3rd edn (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) (hereafter Peters, *God*).

## Faith as belief and trust

At the outset Peters emphasizes that faith is both believing and trusting, both *notitia* and *fiducia*.<sup>2</sup> Given a modern Lutheran allergy to cognitive claims in theology, reflecting a Kantian–existentialist agnosticism that one-sidedly eclipses *notitia* in favor of existentialist *fiducia*, I accent Peters' affirmation of belief as the matter of theology: 'When approaching the claims of the Christian faith, we do so with at least a hypothetical believing in order to begin to understand them.'<sup>3</sup> Peters understands that trust without belief would be deaf and blind. Such deaf and blind trust can and will believe anything that comes along to lay claim on its confidence.<sup>4</sup> This dialectic of trust and belief in Christian faith, then, constitutes a virtuous circle. For Peters, following Pannenberg, systematic theology rigorously prosecutes this dialectic by incorporating the modern principle of 'doubt' in discerning genuinely Christian belief.

'Modern' as it appears with Descartes, this principle of doubt is nonetheless actually rooted in the prophets of Israel and registers throughout the New Testament (Mk 13:5; Gal. 1:6–9, 6:15–16; 1 Jn 4:1–3). As my teacher Christopher Morse always maintained, 'to believe God is to disbelieve the idols'.<sup>5</sup> Making just that distinction in beliefs that identify the God to be trusted is the ever urgent task of theology in its 'production of doctrine'.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, trust is always also bound to a critically discerned believing in something recognizable and thus distinguishable from counterfeits; and this discernment is itself a function of the bone-deep monotheistic commitment to 'truth',<sup>7</sup> to the one true God who is creator of all that is not God: not, then, up above in idle repose and a foggy mist of ineffability, but as accessed *hic et nunc* in the fog and friction of contest with lethal untruths also posing as divine or liberating. As Pharaoh asked Moses, 'And who is the Lord that I should let the people go?' Answering this question about the identification of God is the critical cognitive task of theology.

Precisely as such, however, Christian belief requires also a definite 'demystification' of fundamentalist literalisms within the household of faith.<sup>8</sup> 'God said it; I believe it; that settles it!' is the motto of theological barbarism which

2 Peters, *God*, p. viii.

3 Peters, *God*, p. 52.

4 See in this regard Peters' critique of Sallie McFague, in *God*, p. 79. I would refer here as well to my study of Bonhoeffer's Bethel Confession, which took up Luther's stance against enthusiasm to resist the false claims of German Christianity. See Paul R. Hinlicky, 'Verbum Externum: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Bethel Confession', in R. Wüstenberg and J. Zimmermann, eds., *God Speaks to Us* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang: 2013), pp. 189–215.

5 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

6 Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

7 Peters, *God*, pp. 48, 427, 668.

8 Peters, *God*, p. 49.

short-circuits the intervening question: 'But do you *understand* it?' Trust may be blind in the sense that it looks to a future not yet visible, but it is not deaf; it has heard God speak the promise of that future. The critical principle of doubt in theology thus functions as a hermeneutical moment, not a skeptical absolute. It is not meant to reject belief as such (in distinction from, for example, Bultmann and his followers who find nothing particularly Christian in the list of beliefs, for instance, forming the Apostles' Creed<sup>9</sup>). Rather, the purpose is to purify understanding of precisely what is believed<sup>10</sup> by way of such creedal lists, indeed to reduce such enumerated beliefs to a single cognitive claim about the identification of the God of the gospel in distinction from idols and demons.

Purified in this way, what faith believes is a divinely promised new world,<sup>11</sup> as figured in Pauline apocalyptic.<sup>12</sup> Hence Peters' central, indeed singular claim to truth: *God is the world's future*.<sup>13</sup> Peter's chief claim to truth bears a strong family resemblance to my own claim, more sharply trinitarian in formulation: 'God is the One who is determined to redeem and fulfill the creation through the missions of His Son and Spirit.' This critically purified belief in either case notably entails a strong commitment to the 'literal' coming of a new heaven and earth – even though we know not how. Howsoever it finally obtains, this critically ascertained truth of faith will, if it proves true, retroactively determine the status of every event that has preceded it in an eschaton of judgement.<sup>14</sup> This very eschaton of judgement, on the other hand, has broken into the present in the cross and resurrection of Christ, epistemic access to it being provided in the 'orginary symbols', as Peters terms them, that form the New Testament.

While the 'orginary symbols' of this Christian faith in God as the world's future are not literal representations of the promised outcome, as uncomprehending fundamentalism has it, they nonetheless truly refer to God in this concrete and thus in principle falsifiable way as the future of the very world on which the cross of Jesus stood. Understood on these terms, they constitute Christian theology's ever expanding, ever revised, provisional but adequate for the day construction of a 'worldview'. Herein lies the constructive task of experimenting that complements the aforementioned critical work of testing in systematic theology. Given its basic claim to truth, systematic theology creatively constructs in every new situation a theological interpretation of its context as an event on the way to God as the world's future. The cumulative production of doctrine in this way builds up an ever more adequate view of reality, a 'worldview', albeit in the context of today's

9 Rudolph Bultmann *et al.*, *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H.W. Bartsch (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 3. I have recently and sympathetically debated Bultmann's legacy with David Congdon in a *Syndicate* symposium on the latter's *The Mission of Demythologizing*.

10 Peters, *God*, p. 59.

11 Peters, *God*, p. xiv.

12 Peters, *God*, pp. 91, 89.

13 Peters, *God*, p. 608.

14 Peters, *God*, pp. 286, 607, 622–3.

global pluralism, one worldview alongside many others. This must be the case until the aforementioned eschaton of judgement.

Such are Peters' basic claims about the vocation of systematic theology. Contemporary deconstructionism in theology is rejected as a consequent but self-defeating developments of theology along Kantian and Bultmannian lines that repudiate worldview construction in principle<sup>15</sup> in favor of merely local, hence ghettoized, anthropocentric albeit existentially relevant contextual theologies. Here the cognitive demand for coherence is abandoned in the name of supposed reproductions of the same human experience of grace or liberation by way of kerygmatic intervention. Such multicultural abandon supplants traditional dogmatics. Over against deconstruction, however, Peters affirms that 'the Christian faith is constituted by trust that it is true',<sup>16</sup> where 'it' denotes belief in God as the eschatological consummation not merely of individual trust or localized liberation events but of the entire cosmos, the physical cosmos. A universal claim of this magnitude, I concur, is an implication of any thinking monotheism, while the new pluralism of genitive theologies today at best returns Christian faith to a kind of henotheism, if not more radically to polytheism.

In my view, the understanding task of theology that we encounter in Peters' work is quite justified, if, as I have noted along the way, we sustain the tacit dispute with Bultmann's account of myth and worldview<sup>17</sup> as inadequate to the 'originary Christian symbols'. These symbols, as Peters explains, are divinely given to us as the apostolic synthesis of faith and belief in Jesus Christ behind which we cannot penetrate, if we receive them as divinely given. If we disrespect this limit imposed by the gospel word given prior to thought, we simply put ourselves outside the theological circle. So far so good, as far as I am concerned, though, as we shall see, this doctrine of Scripture as divinely given with the Christ event that it consequently serves to communicate is hotly contested today.

Perhaps it is because of this pressing but unresolved challenge by biblical criticism to the very source of systematic theology that Peters discusses the virtuous circle of Word and Spirit, of belief and trust, *notitia* and *fiducia*, kerygma and justifying faith in a bewildering variety of other ways, as it seems to me. Employing the now commonplace distinction between orders of discourse,<sup>18</sup> he can sometimes<sup>19</sup> treat beliefs, critically examined, as concepts or abstractions at a step removed from primary symbols, and as such revisable in any new contextual situation which finds the inherited concepts outmoded. So, for example, the *ousia* in Nicaea's *homoousios* is a second-order concept borrowed from ancient Platonism and thus revisable in differing philosophical contexts in a way that the originary New Testament 'symbols' of Jesus' unity with God are not, divinely

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15 Peters, *God*, p. 700.

16 Peters, *God*, p. xiv.

17 Peters, *God*, p. 603.

18 Peters, *God*, pp. 72, 188.

19 Peters, *God*, p. 71.

given as they are. One wonders here with Bultmann, however, how this kind of line between the Word of God and the word of man can be drawn. Why are the concepts, not to mention the mythical motifs embedded in the New Testament symbols which they articulate, subject to historical critical relativization in a way that supposed symbols of Jesus' unity with God are not?

At other times, Peters can say that such second-order conceptions like Nicaea's *homoousios* or the Reformation's justification by faith alone are at the heart of faith,<sup>20</sup> as they established Christian identity<sup>21</sup> in the course of the gospel's history because they articulated the 'gospel norm',<sup>22</sup> at decisive junctures and thus bear an abiding claim for the future to formulate in useful language the 'truth of the gospel'. Presumably, as such ecumenically decided normative formulations – the dogmas attended to in dogmatics – these articulated creedal beliefs are transcontextual.

So, as we shall see, Chalcedonian Christology has for Peters a strong claim on all future christological reflection, as does the Reformation's justification by faith alone. Without them, Peters could not affirm, as he does, not only faith as belief and trust but also as 'union with Christ',<sup>23</sup> *in fide Christus adest* (Luther). We will further consider this problem below. For the moment, the point is that without this affirmation of the present Christ, there is no prolepsis of the eschatological future and the project of his systematic theology collapses.

### Prolepsis of the whole

If the rise of the natural sciences to cultural pre-eminence today marks the 'most formidable challenge' to Christian belief,<sup>24</sup> the discovery that the Genesis account of creation was written during Israel's Babylonian exile in the light of salvation history as an interpretation of the best 'natural science' of that day rises to meet the challenge. In other words, it is the promise of the redeemer God for a new future made known in the middle of sorrowful time that evokes belief in him as also the Origin, that he is also the Creator God from the origin of all that is not God. For none less could make and keep such a universal and comprehensive promise. Biblical monotheism is first of all belief in the unity of creation and fulfillment by way of present redemption. For this specific reason, one does not first find faith on some natural knowledge of God the Creator but rather one comes to faith in God the Creator on the basis of the historical experience of God's redeeming word and deed in history with its promise of future fulfillment.

In this light, Peters finds that the critically reconstructed doctrine of creation as eschatological in orientation and scope is fully compatible with the

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20 Peters, *God*, pp. 76, 85.

21 Peters, *God*, p. 77.

22 Peters, *God*, p. 82.

23 Peters, *God*, p. 119.

24 Peters, *God*, p. 268.

contemporary insights of scientific physics in the Big Bang theory as well as with Darwinian evolution, both of which underwrite the emergence in history of new things or 'emergent properties'.<sup>25</sup> Over against dualism, nature is historical and history is natural. These are on a continuum. They do not form a binary opposition. Indeed, instead of viewing the doctrine of creation as what God did once and for all in the past, erecting a solid (natural) stage on which then a(n historically dynamic) drama or comedy will be performed, we now understand creation as continuing from the origin to the eschaton.<sup>26</sup> In this light, blessed creation is the good of becoming while the curse of evil is stasis, fixation, 'unbecoming'.<sup>27</sup> Humanity itself emerges proleptically<sup>28</sup> in the continuing creation as an anticipation of life redeemed and fulfilled; this humanity is revealed in the appearance of the New and True Adam,<sup>29</sup> Jesus Christ, the One who exists ecstatically by faith in God, hope for God's reign and thus the struggle to love others on the way.<sup>30</sup>

This notion of creation continuing to the divinely appointed destination bears several interesting and important implications. Though Peters does not especially emphasize it, it undermines the kind of anthropocentric humanism that constitutes the sovereign self of modernity.<sup>31</sup> Instead, belief in one humanity destined for a community of love<sup>32</sup> and summoned to the dignity of partnership with God in the ongoing work of creation is an article of faith, not sight.<sup>33</sup> Jefferson's truths, then, are not self-evident in our Darwinian world. They are made evident by the calling of humanity as image of God to acquire in history likeness to God in Christ.

What Peters does emphasize, however, is that, if creation is continuous, then 'reality is relational. That postmodern element is the desire to escape the ghetto of autonomy, to realize what is a deeper truth, namely, that the self belongs intrinsically to other people through love and even to the cosmos as a unity of being'.<sup>34</sup> This postmodern 'renaturalizing' of the modern self<sup>35</sup> fits well with Peters' historical-critical reading of the doctrine of creation as eschatologically oriented. John the seer's 'new Jerusalem' or Augustine's 'city of God'<sup>36</sup> come

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25 Peters, *God*, p. 272.

26 Peters, *God*, p. 252.

27 Peters, *God*, pp. 288, 303, 336.

28 Peters, *God*, p. 288.

29 Peters, *God*, p. 300.

30 Peters, *God*, p. 338.

31 Peters, *God*, p. 657, this critique of the modern self surfaces clearly and emphatically in Peters' 3rd edn rebuttal of the alleged 'geocentrism' of Christian belief, see *God*, pp. 702–24.

32 Peters, *God*, p. 337.

33 Peters, *God*, p. 654.

34 Peters, *God*, p. 540.

35 See Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

36 Peters, *God*, pp. 630–1.

from the future to call natural beings to rise up in anticipation of God as the 'end of desire':

I believe we need to start with destiny. What is our destiny? It is ultimately to live with God in the new creation . . . That destiny will determine who we will be. Retroactively, it determines who we are today. We are now on the way, becoming who we will be.<sup>37</sup>

The plural number in the formulation just cited is more than rhetorical; it is a social interpretation of the Christian symbols correcting the one-sided individualism of existentialist theology by returning this individual to the natural and social communities in which it lives, moves and has its being.

If that is the anthropological implication of prolepsis, on the theological side this notion<sup>38</sup> of the future<sup>39</sup> coming to determine the present and judge the past<sup>40</sup> is poised against protological 'simplicity'<sup>41</sup> in theology. It corresponds to the temporalizing of space in the new physics, which sees a continuum in space-time.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, 'archonic' thinking, like 'atomistic reductionism',<sup>43</sup> is the 'fallacy' that imagines that if one knew the initial condition or could reduce complex events to simple and most basic material interactions, one could derive deductively all consequent events. Such knowledge would uncover the mind of God, as Hawking boasted in the conclusion of his *Brief History of Time*.

What such reductions elide, however, is the fact of emergent properties exhibiting unanticipated and for Peters humanly unanticipatable novelty. Theologically, the protological simplicity of God's eternal now envisioning and actualizing all things created in a single act of predestination is thus contrasted with God's eschatological self-determination to be the savior and fulfiller of creation,<sup>44</sup> a free self-determination that includes and does not exclude God's capacity to innovate in history with relatively free creatures in accord with the overarching commitment to his freely determined purpose. From Peters' perspective, the blind alley down which protological simplicity tends, with its logically unavoidable doctrine of double predestination, is aptly captured in a reduction to absurdity cited from Wesley at this juncture: 'The absolutely elect must have been saved even without [Christ]; and the non-elect cannot be saved by him.'<sup>45</sup>

This new orientation of proleptic eschatology in a doctrine of destination rather than in a protological predestination can draw upon the early Luther's

37 Peters, *God*, p. 644.

38 Peters, *God*, p. xiii.

39 Peters, *God*, p. 274.

40 Peters, *God*, pp. 135, 369, 379, 427.

41 Peters, *God*, pp. 33–4, 202, 223, 249.

42 Peters, *God*, p. xiv.

43 Peters, *God*, pp. 643, 725.

44 Peters, *God*, p. 636.

45 Peters, *God*, p. 639.

famous statement that 'this life is becoming not being, labor not rest', as well as from Karl Barth's famous revision of the Calvinist doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 where Barth replaced divine determination of creatures with God's self-determination in relation to creatures to be for them the God of grace. In turn, prolepsis lends a significant new framework for understanding the doctrine of justification:

the explication of the gospel in terms of justification is at least in part dependent upon its explication in terms of new creation. The justice of God, of which Christ is the proleptic embodiment, is for us still an eschatological hope. We are still sinners, still participants in the injustice of the old order. Yet, in Christ, we participate as well in the justice of the expected new order.<sup>46</sup>

There is precedent for this qualification of imputative righteousness by the notion of participation in the New Being in Paul Tillich, the other great mentor for Peters alongside Pannenberg.

But I would accent something else here for future reference. Peters' reframing should situate justifying faith in the ongoing apocalyptic battle: 'Faith is under continual attack by temptation from within and suffering from without, due to the warfare between the two aeons, due to the conflict between the present and the future.'<sup>47</sup> Decisively, the apocalyptic recasting of the Reformation doctrine of justification would mark a parting of ways with the idealistic theology of progress in the nineteenth century. *Futurum*, meaning the future as outcome of the past, is not *adventus*, which rather makes the past an outcome of the future of God whose reign comes.<sup>48</sup> The gospel proclaims the coming of God, *adventus*. Faith in history as intrinsically progressive – our idolatrous desire to be 'on the right side of history' – is a stance which leaves the crucified Jesus dead in the tomb. This hubris is thus checked by the theology of the cross of the incarnate and risen Son of God.<sup>49</sup> We will return to this problem.

## Christ

These reflections lead us, then, to Peters' Christology, which affirms the logic of the Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures in one person,<sup>50</sup> such that the one person communicates attributes of either nature to himself (that is, qua personal agent) for the accomplishment of the saving mission of God.<sup>51</sup> Carl Braaten's

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46 Peters, *God*, p. 93.

47 Peters, *God*, p. 601.

48 Peters, *God*, p. 604.

49 Peters, *God*, pp. 138, 140, 160.

50 Peters, *God*, p. 381.

51 Peters, *God*, p. 383.



strong affirmation of the *solus Christus* is thus appropriated,<sup>52</sup> as is the logic of Nicaea's *homoousios*.<sup>53</sup> Yet this logic bears critically upon the very concept of 'nature' which Nicaea employed. Whatever we think God to be must be normed, not uncritically presupposed, by God's self-identification with the Crucified. To be sure, the God of creation, redemption and fulfillment must be conceived as powerful, wise and good to do what he promises, yet these attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence must further be conceived in ways that underwrite rather than undermine the true incarnation and redemptive act of the divine Son. They are, as such, concepts of divine possibilities, not reified notions of divine actuality that finally disappear into a fog of unknowable simplicity. Thus the danger of a philosophical presupposition stemming from Platonism's reification of concepts<sup>54</sup> in the use of the concept of *ousia* or *natura* in Christology is identified, since it can subvert the soteriologically crucial communication of attributes in this unique person, and thus also his saving work. For what can truly be communicated is in some way mutable – a way that would be divine and unfathomable, to be sure – but mutable all the same.

Speaking of truly divine mutability, I have not mentioned thus far some of the more sensationalist rhetoric Peters indulges, like that of the 'queering' of theology. But, on examination, the queering of theology is little more than a fresh spin on anti-essentialism, a position that I endorse – though with the important qualification that construction of social identities by and for creatures is both needful and flexible. It is needful because no isolated individual can possibly make the infinity of decisions by way of which he or she might prosper in an embodied life-span. Rather, a social individual receives identities from birth and rearing which he or she then modifies to find an adult way in life. Such social constructions of son or daughter, male or female and so on are not creation out of nothing; rather they are relatively flexible, socially useful interpretations (which we call in this case gender) of relatively constant biological facts for the sake of ever-modernizing formations. We can see this gender flexibility already in Luther, for whom male and female differ essentially in no other way than in biological function. But in reproductive function they do differ with relative fixity.

Theology that takes history seriously as God's continuous creating on the way through redemption to fulfillment cannot in any case settle on a fixed human essence in the sense that an immanent teleology can be known from nature by sinful knowers, which would normatively define the destiny of any particular individual, such as the now notorious stereotype of 'women barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen'. So I could speak here with Vladimir Lossky and Sarah Hinlicky Wilson about the 'grace of anti-essentialism', derived from the Eastern doctrine of the Trinity, privileging the person over its nature as the true end of God's creating,

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52 Peters, *God*, p. 677.

53 Peters, *God*, p. 677.

54 Peters, *God*, p. 426.

redeeming and fulfilling of humanity.<sup>55</sup> By the same reasoning, we retain the biological concepts of heterosexuality, of 'male' and 'female', not to predetermine the destiny of individuals qua persons, but to sort out the characteristic 'species typical' possibilities of those who give birth from those who inseminate.

Our pragmatic need is for concepts to sort the infinitude of data, which prove useful so far as they actually work for specific purposes. As a non-reified concept, we need clear notions of divinity and humanity to parse the biblical distinction between Creator and creature, so that we may know what is possible for God and what for humanity, what we must do and what God must do for us. What we cannot do theologically, however, is to presume already in our state of sinful alienation to know what is divine and what is human. God therefore defines God for us in the very act of doing for us in Christ what we cannot do for ourselves.<sup>56</sup>

Returning now to Peters' Christology. Anti-essentialism is also the reason why quests for an 'historical' Jesus, presuming already to know what true humanity is and must be when just this is the question in dispute in the case of Christ's person, prove more to be mirrors of contemporary consciousness than discoveries of *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*.<sup>57</sup> Heidegger would tell us that being human is being-towards-death, but according to the originary symbols of the New Testament, Christ displays true humanity in being-towards-death-and-resurrection. Peters can accordingly make this significant judgement about the pre-Easter Jesus of Nazareth: 'Regardless of what Jesus himself meant to say, it was simply necessary to employ apocalyptic language and imagery to convey the message.'<sup>58</sup> Jesus' private thought processes are of little interest in the 'originary Christian symbols', even if they could be reconstructed from the sources. But his public message with its implicit 'claim to authority' commands great attention, as does his decision to take responsibility for us before God. This claim to authority for the Son of Man together with Jesus' fateful decision in accord with it, however, invokes the apocalyptic mythology of his Second Temple Jewish *Weltbild* – the stumbling block (think of Albert Schweitzer!) that blocks any and all modernizing of Jesus in the (false) name of historical 'objectivity'.

Speaking of stumbling blocks to modern consciousness, Peters' defense of Christ's priestly work of atonement, with an assist but also a correction of René Girard,<sup>59</sup> really stands out. Because of Peters' strong cognitive claim that God is the future of the world, a qualified defense of Anselm's *Cur deus homo* is and can be made.<sup>60</sup> Peters disputes the caricature of Anselm's God as a narcissistic feudal

55 Peters, *God*, p. 431. See Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. J.H. Erickson and T.E. Bird (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), and Sarah Hinlicky-Wilson, *Woman, Women and the Priesthood in the Trinitarian Theology of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel* (London: T&T Clark, 2013).

56 Peters, *God*, p. 388.

57 Peters, *God*, pp. 114, 351.

58 Peters, *God*, p. 358.

59 See Peters, *God*, pp. 87, 327, 393–4.

60 Peters, *God*, p. 409.

lord whose ego has been offended and whose subjective sense of personal honor must be appeased by a bloody offering. He rightly understands Anselm's inquiry into the justice of God's mercy within a covenantal context;<sup>61</sup> the concern is with God's office as Creator, not his ego, in a world that merits only punishment for the ruin of sin. He sees that, as such, Anselm's motif of Christ's meritorious obedience in voluntary suffering for the sake of others to this extent backs Luther's 'joyful exchange' of human sin and Christ's righteousness<sup>62</sup> because it explains Christ's righteousness not as a quiescent quality of nature but as the fruit of his personal act of obedience to the double love commandment. Jesus abolished the law as condemnation, not by dictate, even by dictate of 'grace', but because out of grace he ethically fulfilled the law of love,<sup>63</sup> indeed, over-fulfilled it as the innocent sin-bearer<sup>64</sup> who for us, in fidelity to God, met and surpassed God's righteous wrath on the ruin of his creation.

While this Lutheran reading of atonement differs from Anselm's notion of Christ as innocent punishment-bearer, whose surplus merit is made available to the needy sinner for their satisfaction of God's justice, in either case Christ's free obedience to death is the divinely given deed which does in humanity and for humanity what it cannot do for itself. Only so can justification really be *propter Christum*,<sup>65</sup> on Christ's account. Likewise, only so does Christ's gift of self in substitution for others – especially in Luther's version – undo the scapegoating that goes back to Adam (Gen. 3:12) once and for all.<sup>66</sup> His sacrifice turns sacrifice once and for all into substitution for others, no longer self-love seeking to escape the consequences of its own sin by off-loading blame with its punishment on to others. This turning of human subjectivity from doer of scapegoating to recipient of sacrificial gift comes about by union with Christ,<sup>67</sup> who is thus affirmed as risen, victorious and thus present in faith.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, he can be present in faith for Peters because his resurrection is an objective event in history,<sup>69</sup> a 'miracle'.<sup>70</sup> He comes to faith as the very One who he was in history<sup>71</sup> so that the joyful exchange with Christ in Word and Sacraments is not an impersonal appropriation of merit but a personally transformative unification with Christ in his cross and resurrection, a Spirit-worked conformation to Christ. And so the Christian is Christian not only in name, but as one now freed to love in deed, becoming a 'little Christ' to the neighbor.

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61 Peters, *God*, p. 412.

62 Peters, *God*, pp. 413, 452.

63 Peters, *God*, p. 414.

64 Peters, *God*, p. 416.

65 Peters, *God*, p. 435.

66 Peters, *God*, pp. 419–20.

67 Peters, *God*, p. 422.

68 Peters, *God*, p. 446.

69 Peters, *God*, p. 375.

70 Peters, *God*, p. 604.

71 Peters, *God*, p. 614.

To mention a concession to modern consciousness in Christology, however, Peters' proposal to expand the traditional motif of the threefold office of Christ with a fourth office associated with feminist theologies of Sophia<sup>72</sup> strikes this reader as far less persuasive; it is a fourth wheel, so to speak, that does no real work. Indeed, citing C.F.D. Moule later on, Peters knows just this critique, and even expresses a definite ambivalence about his own proposal at the end its presentation.<sup>73</sup> Theology may and must experiment; but not all experiments are successful.

More successful, as already suggested, is Peters' christological account of justification, which treats justification together with sanctification, understood as new creation. Justification and sanctification are presented as conceptually distinguishable in terms of righteousness by forgiveness and righteousness by new being in Christ, but not separated in Christian experience.<sup>74</sup> Peters should press this recognition further, for at one point he falls into the clichéd assertion that the 'Lutheran' take on justification and sanctification involves identifying salvation as 'complete and total' in justification, and making 'sanctification a human expression of the life in grace in this world'.<sup>75</sup> But if, as we have heard, justification must be understood together with new creation, and if the grace of faith given by the Spirit enables reception of the grace – otherwise nothing but offense – of a crucified Christ, then even the minimal conceptual separation of 'justification first [as God's deed] and sanctification following [as human response]' fails to withstand scrutiny (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30).

Helpful here would be the full trinitarian dialectic of Word and Spirit rather than dialectical theology's back and forth between 'the Word of God and the word of man'. For the Spirit's gift of justifying faith is already sanctification, if faith is in fact the Spirit's sovereign calling and gift. That is why, as Peters knows, the doctrine's original title was Justification by Faith Alone, not by Grace Alone (that is, grace was never in dispute amongst the sixteenth-century parties). It was precisely the Roman counter to 'by faith alone' that held justification by grace to actualize by faith working in love, that is, by sanctification as 'a human expression of the life of grace in the world'. If this is right, we must also note that, for Justification by Faith Alone, 'salvation' remains future, outstanding, present proleptically – precisely not already 'complete and total'. The certainty of faith, which is not yet sight, is given with the Spirit, a down payment on the world's promised future, the prolepsis of our final transformation and thus the real beginning of the righteousness of the forgiven sinner.

On the burning question of the scope of salvation today in view of our consciousness of religious pluralism, Peters adopts a position of 'confessional universalism', which asserts that all may be saved, but if they are saved they will be saved by Christ.<sup>76</sup> The deeper question here is what kind of salvation is

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72 Peters, *God*, pp. 347, 361.

73 See Peters, *God*, pp. 513, 361.

74 Peters, *God*, pp. 437–8.

75 Peters, *God*, p. 444.

76 Peters, *God*, p. 669.

envisioned.<sup>77</sup> Not all utopias are the same. Peters' takedown of John Hick's 'confusion' in this regard is worth the price of admission: 'Hick's own philosophical position actually functions as one position within interreligious dialogue while pretending to serve as the inclusive framework for dialogue itself.'<sup>78</sup> That philosophical position is a boring reprise of ancient Platonism's *philosophia perennis*: 'There is a mysterious and transcendent reality that only partially revealed itself in each of the various religious traditions, and the normative claims of each tradition are due to human narrow-mindedness and not to the validity of any of the claims.'<sup>79</sup> This approach abolishes difference and the multiple in any serious sense. Difference and the multiple, however, are the *sine qua non* of salvation as communion, as the coming of beloved community as articulated by strong Trinitarianism personalism.

One wonders, however, whether the same critique could apply to Peters' own solution. He hypothesizes that if there is a hell it 'belongs to an interim period prior to the consummation', since an eternal hell seems to contradict both divine love and divine power.<sup>80</sup> Hell is thus reduced to purgatory for the sake of *apokatastasis*, a 'heresy' to which Peters cheekily confesses his adherence.<sup>81</sup> What survives the systematizing is the threat of an eternal hell, which, Peters concedes, 'indelibly belongs to the New Testament symbol system'.<sup>82</sup> Peters' reasoning here, he reminds, is hypothesis, not dogma. But this speculative reasoning does turn the biblical narrative from a genre of victory and defeat into one of comedy. If difference and the multiple are original, however, then an eternal difference gained and established, as in Revelation 18–20, is a fitting and final denouement, as Augustine argued against Origen. Otherwise there is no good reason why, as Augustine pointed out, the *exitus–reditus* cycle of *apokatastasis* could not repeat, indeed repeat eternally. So we end up with the eternal return of the same, precisely not eschatological novelty and finality, as in Revelation 21. The necessary experimentation in theology here, therefore, continues.

## Spirit

The Spirit permits but also tests such experimentation in theology. For the Spirit is the unifier of what is multiple in difference.<sup>83</sup> In the eternal life of God, the Spirit is the unifier of the Father and the Son as in the economy of salvation the Spirit unifies the future and present and belief and trust.<sup>84</sup> Crucially, this unification is

77 Peters, *God*, p. 688.

78 Peters, *God*, p. 688.

79 Peters, *God*, p. 679.

80 Peters, *God*, pp. 692–4.

81 Peters, *God*, p. 695.

82 Peters, *God*, p. 635.

83 Peters, *God*, pp. 475, 478, 480.

84 See Peters, *God*, pp. 510, 476, 482–3.

harmonization not homogenization,<sup>85</sup> only by working new harmonies of love in justice can this unification of the Spirit also work liberation from structures of malice structuring injustice<sup>86</sup> as also liberation from each believer's old self.<sup>87</sup> Hence sanctification (which, as above, is already at work in justifying faith) is transformation,<sup>88</sup> creating new becoming in Christ *ex vetere*, out of the old Adam of unbecoming,<sup>89</sup> albeit in the still unredeemed world of disunity.<sup>90</sup>

Because of this interim place of faith and assembly of faith in the Spirit's battle for redemptive unification against the pseudo-salvations of oppressive totalisms or homogenizations, the believing church is in constant need of epiclesis.<sup>91</sup> Such a church in turn is both event and koinonia,<sup>92</sup> both instrument of its Lord as body to Head and precious fruit of his labor, both a calling to service of others and a good of fellowship in its own right.

Not least of the church's interim contributions lies in the prophetic critique of political sovereignty that it renders,<sup>93</sup> for just here, in the question of sovereignty, is where the confrontation occurs between two kinds of monotheism.<sup>94</sup> It would be too easy, in this connection, to foreground Christianity's faith in the eschatological unity of God the redeemer and fulfiller of creation, as articulated in trinitarian doctrine of the being of God in the eternal becoming of the eternal multiple, over against Islam's principled dissent.<sup>95</sup> To his credit, Peters acknowledges the cleavage here but also respects it.<sup>96</sup> No doubt this derives from his making critical doubt in matters of belief a principle internal to Christian faith, which must hear and understand the Qur'an's apodictic pronouncement that God 'neither begets nor is begotten' if it is to understand what is at stake in its own trinitarian belief in God. Just as Jewish perplexity about the kerygma of a crucified Messiah must become a reflection internal to Christian theology today, so also Islamic perplexity about the Christian's one God as multiple *ad se* and so also *ad extra* must become a reflection internal to Christian theology.

## Trinity

As could be predicted at this point in our engagement, Peters joins forces with the trinitarian revival of the last century. He affirms an immanent or eternal Trinity<sup>97</sup>

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85 Peters, *God*, p. 481.

86 Peters, *God*, pp. 486–7.

87 Peters, *God*, p. 488.

88 Peters, *God*, p. 496.

89 Peters, *God*, p. 503.

90 Peters, *God*, p. 515.

91 Peters, *God*, pp. 566, 571.

92 Peters, *God*, p. 524.

93 Peters, *God*, p. 528.

94 Peters, *God*, p. 676.

95 Peters, *God*, p. 208.

96 Peters, *God*, p. 219.

97 Peters, *God*, p. 203.

because it backs up the freedom of God<sup>98</sup> in the decision to enact an eschatological creation that God in no sense needs in order to complete or actualize his own identity, but rather gives as a free gift out of divine surplus in accord with his own eternal identity. The eternal Trinity's unity is the dynamic life of the perichoresis of persons,<sup>99</sup> not the self-sameness of a reified concept of oneness,<sup>100</sup> hence a socially modeled trinity.<sup>101</sup> Peters adopts Jenson's proposal to speak of the three 'identities' of God, in place of the traditional 'persons'.<sup>102</sup> The language of person today is said to connote individual substantiality and autonomy in misleading ways (as it in fact has in the West going all the way back to Boethius, though this is not how the Eastern Fathers understand the trinitarian hypostases). The virtue of the substitute, 'identity', is that it is thought to express a more public view of the agent as known in its acts and external relations.

Peters likewise affirms (reportedly, he first named) 'Rahner's rule' of the identity of the immanent and economic Trinity.<sup>103</sup> 'Placing the historical creation within the Trinitarian life of God[, w]e get both *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio continua* in a single package that includes both creation and redemption. This is Trinitarian theism at work.'<sup>104</sup> This yields both divine aseity and yet, if I may put it this way, a certain economic 'codependency' for Peters. 'God is not dependent upon the world for God's own being. This is true save in one respect. The full realization of God's power is dependent on the cooperation of the cosmos',<sup>105</sup> a position that Peters names 'eschatological pantheism'.

A worry here, akin to the one expressed above about *apokatastasis*, is that in spite of Peters' strong affirmation of the freedom of God in creation backed up by the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, affirming codependency in matters of salvation threatens the whole doctrinal structure with collapse. Surely this is not Peters' intention. But questions can hardly be suppressed. If humanity fails, does God fail? If the cosmos ends, as contemporary science envisions, in infinite stillness, darkness and cold, has God died too? Is God the future of the world or is the future of the world God? Is it really *adventus* not *futurum*, eschatology not idealism, mission to the nations not historical 'progress'? The worry is evident.

## Method

If the foregoing is a fair and adequate representation of the chief features of Peters' doctrinal teaching, I wish now to turn to the method by which he argues these

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98 Peters, *God*, p. 207.

99 Peters, *God*, p. 204.

100 Peters, *God*, pp. 210–11.

101 Peters, *God*, p. 211.

102 Peters, *God*, pp. 205–6.

103 Peters, *God*, p. 216.

104 Peters, *God*, p. 267.

105 Peters, *God*, p. 256.

claims. It is always more interesting to engage first with the substantive claims being argued in theology. The path by which we get to articulating and arguing those claims is important but in fact derivative from what is primary in theology: claims about the truth of the gospel, which is given to our thinking prior to its being thought theologically. *Deus dixit* is the non-adjudicable point of departure for theology that claims the legacy of Luther. Epistemology (or, as I prefer to put it, an account of epistemic access) is, therefore, not a foundational discipline. In acknowledging, as we have seen, the virtuous circle of belief and trust embedded from the origin in the very symbols of Christian faith, Peters in fact recognizes this, even if he does not always clearly follow through on its chief implication for us today, as it seems to me.

That implication is this: theology does not have to justify its inquiry into its peculiar subject matter other than in practical and political ways in a given context, certainly not 'in principle' before a supposed 'Tribunal of Reason', as Kant maintained in his *Conflict of the Faculties*. On the contrary, as for Peters the church's prophetic ministry consists in challenging political sovereignty, so also on the cultural field of the life of the mind theology challenges science when science fixates and totalizes and so turns into a self-justifying ideology exploiting its otherwise well-earned prestige. It exposes concealed but operative theologies at work in ideologies,<sup>106</sup> including the ideology of scientism, and demands an accounting. In this prophetic posture theology wags its own tail.

What we know today three centuries after the Enlightenment is that science changes,<sup>107</sup> such that the putative warfare of science and religion turns out on examination to be a battle between rival sciences-cum-theologies.<sup>108</sup> This is so because science is inextricably a human practice embedded in human passions and interests – as the emergent discipline of Science and Technology Studies is showing.<sup>109</sup> Historically, the most dubious causes<sup>110</sup> – racial hygiene and eugenics, rationalizations, with accompanying technologies, of ecological despoliation, mass destruction weaponry – have been enabled and indeed made sacrosanct by science in the name of human progress and enlightenment. Thus in Peters' own work, we see how theology is capable of critiques that both expose extra-scientific, that is, cryptically theological assumptions embedded in real, existing science, and interpret the larger value of the scientific enterprise in accord with the vocation of humanity according to Genesis 1:26–8.<sup>111</sup> The pragmatic justification of theology

106 Brent Adkins and Paul R. Hinlicky, *Rethinking Philosophy and Theology with Deleuze: A New Cartography* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

107 Peters, *God*, p. 720.

108 John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

109 Sergio Sismondo, *An Introduction to Science and Technology Studies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

110 Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

111 Peters, *God*, pp. 723–4.



as an academic enterprise consists, in chief part, in the fruit it bears in such critique and interpretation.

If that is right, it is still something of a challenge to synthesize the many things that Peters says about his theological method, which variously appears as learning, explicating, systematizing by a principle of coherence,<sup>112</sup> explication for the sake of understanding<sup>113</sup> – sometimes more normatively as evangelical explication<sup>114</sup> and other times more speculatively as worldview construction.<sup>115</sup> He speaks of three stages through which faith passes: (1) the naïveté of the ‘originary symbols’ (which is not fundamentalism;<sup>116</sup> fundamentalism is rather persistence in a childish faith in spite of adulthood), (2) critical deconstruction in gaining adulthood, and (3) post-critical reconstruction in maturity.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, he acknowledges his own personal journey through these stages. In this fashion, he locates his theological project in Euro-American postmodernity,<sup>118</sup> that is, in the breakdown of the modern, understood as the sophomoric certitudes of adolescence casting off its self-caused immaturity.

Peters embraces Pannenberg’s claim for theology as science,<sup>119</sup> as we have seen in his strong cognitive claim for God as the world’s future, but in so doing he justifies disciplined speculation<sup>120</sup> that ventures interpretations of present experience of the eschatological interim as God’s creating on the way to the divine destination. ‘Constructive’ theology thus steps beyond exposition<sup>121</sup> in the ever new process of a erecting a comprehensive worldview,<sup>122</sup> working its way by a criterion of inner coherence.<sup>123</sup> Throughout, Peters frequently adverts to the idea of theology as a second-order reflection in the movement from symbol to explication.<sup>124</sup>

At some points in this constructivism, Peters seems to bend in Tillich’s or Pannenberg’s Neoplatonic direction to speak of the world as participating in God by way of symbolizations,<sup>125</sup> and of theology as ascending to knowledge of this One through the chain of symbols, a truly ‘Catholic’ view of the world as itself ‘sacramental’. One wonders in Peters’ case whether this represents in fact a Platonic move as he speaks approvingly of concepts that transcend and abstract

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112 Peters, *God*, p. ix.

113 Peters, *God*, p. 60.

114 Peters, *God*, pp. 8, 61, 617.

115 Peters, *God*, p. 125.

116 Peters, *God*, p. 50.

117 Peters, *God*, p. 38.

118 Peters, *God*, p. 133.

119 Peters, *God*, p. 18.

120 Peters, *God*, pp. 162, 173.

121 Peters, *God*, p. 147.

122 Peters, *God*, p. 141.

123 Peters, *God*, p. 144, thus my immanently critical questions about *apokatastasis* and progress above.

124 See, for example, Peters, *God*, pp. 396, 425, 430.

125 Peters, *God*, pp. 54, 64.

from images.<sup>126</sup> Are these abstracts more real than the symbols? Is Jesus' obedience to death a picture or representation that yields to a reality which is the concept of divine grace, now comprehended in the abstraction, 'God is gracious' and thus regarded as the really real over against the shadowy copy that is Jesus' agony? I cannot think so.

Peters knows that this would be a disastrous move, even though much contemporary theology trades in conceptualizing religious representations and thinks of the progressive history of salvation as the progress in conceptualizing the deity: 'To posit pure concepts such as grace, gift, or agape is to posit abstractions, to imagine ideals that simply do not exist in our everyday world. Such purities does not exist either for us or for God.'<sup>127</sup> But what then is explication of faith's symbols if not such construction of conceptual abstractions subject in turn to systematizing in some scheme of their progressive unfolding? What else can be meant if Peters truly affirms that faith's symbols are open to growth and change by impetus of the feedback loop of conceptualization?<sup>128</sup>

'The symbol gives rise to the thought', Peters' teacher Ricoeur famously wrote. This is the safer basis for understanding Peters' methodology. The phenomenological point is that something prior to thought is given to thought, something prior to the rational processing of theological thinking. In the discussion previously mentioned about the scope of salvation, Peters, speaking to 'any student of systematic theology who seeks to harmonize everything so that all the elements cohere with one another', cautions against such, well, thoroughgoing 'systematic coherence'. Such a 'systematic' procedure is 'difficult if not impossible . . . without doing injustice to one or another path taken by exegesis' of the New Testament symbols. Well said! Nonetheless, Peters himself appears to plunge where angels have been warned not to tread, asking 'where evangelical explication might take us in the pursuit of hypothetical reconstruction'.<sup>129</sup> At the end of this explication, as we have seen, the double witness of the New Testament to the universality of grace and to the danger of eternal loss remains unreconciled. The fault, Peters says, does not belong to systematic theology. The 'ambiguity lies in the biblical symbols themselves'.<sup>130</sup>

Or does the fault lie in the method that finds this 'ambiguity' at fault? In the very attempt at a 'systematic' theology? Implied in these questions to Peters is the reason I prefer to speak of doctrinal theology as critical dogmatics. There are questions posed for us by the gospel in the course of its history that God alone can resolve, reducing theology at this penultimate juncture to a salutary stance of witness to the reality not in its comprehension or control. To be sure, one comes to such imponderables precisely because of a systematic principle of coherence, and

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126 Peters, *God*, p. 226.

127 Peters, *God*, p. 465.

128 Peters, *God*, p. 680.

129 Peters, *God*, p. 691.

130 Peters, *God*, p. 696.

the demand for semantical univocity, which serves to lift up to view the apparent contradiction, for instance, between the universal promise of salvation and the earnest threat of eternal loss. In respect of the still outstanding light of glory, God is and must be a surd to attempts to comprehend God in seamless coherence. An eschatological theology which is consequent, therefore, reaches its limit here. It can only be true to its object at this juncture by pointing to the future consummation as the one true answer to such questions. In this argument, let me note, I am relying on Luther's discussion of the three lights of nature, grace and glory.<sup>131</sup>

The worry about Peters' method, however, persists. He states that 'God is already present in the act of our questioning . . . Pursuing theological reflection is a process of refining and, in a sense, enhancing our already existing understanding of God at the compact level of symbolic meaning.'<sup>132</sup> This ambiguous affirmation, as we have seen, cannot be taken as a gesture towards 'natural theology'. Peters' meaning is that God is present in the biblical symbols, which have already grasped the inquirers who seek to understand what they believe. *Fides quaerens intellectum*. So far so good. The gap between naïve faith and critical understanding is occupied, as we recall, by the moment of doubt. Because of the principle of dubitability, Peters often writes in terms reminiscent of Pascal's wager,<sup>133</sup> with the twist that theology's hypothetical reconstructions can hedge the bet by closing the plausibility gap.

But in whose eyes? And by what right?<sup>134</sup> It is this twist which continues to worry me. Is the critical task of theology to make belief easier by making its cognitive claims more plausible or the bet of faith more reasonable? Or is the task to make belief finally impossible except as purified witness to the God who is coming grounded in the non-transcendable *Deus dixit*?

In the latter case, even to ask theological questions presupposes a canon and history of interpretation. Since you cannot have a Bible without interpretation and a tradition of interpretation, however, it is certainly true, as Peters seems to emphasize, that traditional church interpretation (that is, creedal orthodoxy) 'easily becomes justification for erecting a hierarchy of privileged interpreters'; Peters mentions here the all too easy target of 'ecclesiastical authority'. More searchingly, he could and should have included in this category of 'privileged interpreters' his own volume of 'systematic theology'. It too affirms as dogma the circle of Scripture and creedal tradition,<sup>135</sup> given the gospel norm.<sup>136</sup> This move puts Peters' systematic theology, for all its dialogical openness, within the privileged circle of revelation and faith which would be something cheaply and

131 Thomas Reinhuber, *Kämpfender Glaube: Studien zu Luthers Bekenntnis am Ende von De servo arbitrio* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000).

132 Peters, *God*, p. 53.

133 Peters, *God*, pp. 51–2, 56, 81.

134 Peters, *God*, p. 100.

135 Peters, *God*, pp. 102–3.

136 Peters, *God*, pp. 83–4.

inconsequently attacked under the problematic assumption that belief can be made reasonable by speculatively filling in gaps in plausibility, if in fact that is what Peters attempts.

In fact, Peters is well aware of the problem here, despite his posturing. The first ecumenical dogma of the canonical Scriptures of Old and Testaments, in accord with the primitive baptismal creeds, tells of the One God determined by the missions of his Son and Spirit to redeem and fulfill the creation. But this scriptural testimony to the *Deus dixit* is the jugular vein at which contemporary biblical studies aim. Systematic theology is rocked to the foundations by 'the appearance of biblical scholars who challenge the hierarchy ... Biblical critics who take no prisoners ... [but] with every literary knife and historical machete ... slash and slay the biblical text'. The canonical Bible is thus and as such the first and foremost 'dogmatological hierarchy' if I would deploy the derogatory terminology Peters invented to tag 'ecclesiastical authority'. Is it not whistling in the dark, in face of this challenge, to conclude that 'despite the near chaos of competing interpretations [today] ... there is but one Bible that cradles the living Christ'.<sup>137</sup> How is that not an *obiter dicta*?

I do not know, then, if theology can have it both ways. Peters is emphatic in writing that the basic biblical symbols are not translatable,<sup>138</sup> but rather must be learned on their own terms as the primary source<sup>139</sup> of Christian faith, constituting the 'prism'<sup>140</sup> through which faith sees the world. If this is so, it is also the prism through which faith sees the Bible. In that case, creedal beliefs are already formative of the Bible, taken as canon or rule of faith.<sup>141</sup> The unity of the testaments was in fact a creedal decision against Gnosticism's dualism in the doctrine of God. The harmonization of the otherwise diverse evangelical narratives in the New Testament is likewise a creedal decision against Gnosticism's corresponding docetism in Christology. The unity of the one God's determination to redeem and fulfill the creation fallen prey to hostile powers is the trinity of persons, the Father who sends, the Son who goes and the Spirit who returns the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father, as redeemed humanity is unified with the Son by the Spirit. These dogmas which explore and articulate the Christian's confession of the *Deus dixit* are irrevocable signposts on the path of Christian theology.

If that is so, perhaps the very notion, rigorously taken, of a 'systematic' theology is problematic. The gospel in its history produces dogma, that is, teachings necessary to the ongoing proclamation of the gospel that in this precise way make a binding claim on conscience. Critical knowledge of this would

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137 Peters, *God*, p. 101.

138 Peters, *God*, p. 24.

139 Peters, *God*, pp. 62–3, 80, 96.

140 Peters, *God*, p. 63.

141 See Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (St Paul, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

indicate that dogmatics is the proper form of Christian theology, that is, a discipline which tests and also experiments with formulations of the beliefs that prove necessary to proclamation of the gospel. The opposite is also true. Just because of the gravity of such a binding claim on conscience, what Peters calls 'dogmatomachy' – beliefs submitted to on mere authority (fingers crossed!) – must also be rejected as inadequate. Conscientious assent is the free and joyful assent of persuasion, not servile acceptance under coercion. Such a dogmatics, then, must be critical. It can only gain conscientious assent critically. Critical dogmatics does not interpret the ancient text in light of our modern context (as if the latter were – uncritically – made axiomatic), but rather the contemporary context – any context – is to be interpreted in light of the biblical text from which the living Christ speaks<sup>142</sup> to Spirit-wrought faith. You cannot get more critical than that – so Barth, the critics are not critical enough!

Perhaps for Peters such methodological intricacies are beside the point. Manifestly, a chief contention throughout his work is that the Christian 'symbols' are not the source of social oppression nor does the solution to oppression consist in abandoning them. The theological task rather consists in the 'liberating' or evangelical explication of them.<sup>143</sup> *Abusus non tollit usum.*<sup>144</sup> On this, of course, I am in full agreement. But Peters' apologetic air, which corresponds to the very posture of systematic theology which takes context as seriously as it does text under the overriding epistemic demand for coherence, leads to our somewhat diverging assessments of the spiritual situation today in Euro-American post-Christendom.

## Our situation

If one were to trace the developments in Peters' three Prefaces from 1990, 2002 and 2015, one would discover an interesting and significant development in the description of our context. The Prefaces proceed from an initial celebration of postmodern holism,<sup>145</sup> which allows the theologian to regard God as the context of all contexts and world's future. There is one world of subjects and objects with God as author of both, the transcendent source of correspondence between world and knowers.<sup>146</sup> Provisional correspondence of mind to reality is truth, according to contemporary epistemologies of critical realism. In the second edition, however, the emergence of postmodern deconstructionism threatens this most basic belief in truth. It is a threat apparently immanent to postmodernism,<sup>147</sup> and the danger is that it will lead to a pluralism of ghettos, each speaking a discourse unintelligible

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142 Peters, *God*, pp. 55–6.

143 Peters, *God*, p. 248.

144 Peters, *God*, p. 81.

145 Peters, *God*, pp. xi, xii–xiii, xv; the theme remains in the 3rd edn, pp. 30–1, 56, 135.

146 Peters, *God*, p. 20.

147 Peters, *God*, p. xxi.

to others, Babel eternalized.<sup>148</sup> This threat justifies and indeed makes urgent the work in systematic theology of projecting visions or hypothetical constructions of the whole to lend the human prospect an inclusive, universal telos. In the Preface to the third edition, so-called 'nones' (those unaffiliated to any religion) and SBNRs (those who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious) have emerged from the ghettos along with celebrity-hound public atheists. A cacophony of worldviews seems to indicate that deconstruction has won the field,<sup>149</sup> allowing Peters to denounce by name the extremities to which he now sees postmodernism darkly tending in Islamic terrorism and Hindu nationalism alongside Christian fundamentalism.<sup>150</sup> A renewed emphasis on the doctrine of justification in response to the contemporary religious violence of scapegoating is in this way justified.

These shifting scenarios attest both to a sensitive diagnostician of our times and to the old canard that he who marries the *Zeitgeist* today will be a widower tomorrow. Perhaps this observation betrays the fact that I am a half-generation younger than Peters. My earliest memories from the 1960s are not so much the celebrated time of new hopefulness, but of the assassinations, the war in Vietnam, Watergate and the emergence of the drug culture that morphed the Age of Aquarius into the Me Generation. As is evident, I tend to a far more apocalyptic reading of the signs of the times. Take your pick: Republican economic collapse on account of spiraling debt or Democratic ecological collapse on account of unsustainable economic 'progress'. That said, I do not think that the aspiration for holism is an adequate characterization of the 'plane of immanence' (Deleuze) on which we live today, whether we take it joyfully (and thoughtlessly) as a grand wave (a tsunami!) on which to surf or, as I take it, as the prison-house of the eternal repetition of the same.

Briefly put, contemporary culture in Euro-America is privilege stripped of its rationale but unwilling to pay the consequent price for justice in society. Its privilege had been to bear witness to the gospel. In the course of modernity, this privilege transmuted into the white man's burden to civilize little brown brothers while training them in hard but honest labor. Today, this privilege consists in global capitalism's extraction of wealth by off-loading all risk on to the backs of others. Greed, which is the form the original sin of envy (*sicut Deus eritis*), is taken by the privileged wealthy as good, indeed, our highest good. In comparison, nothing for us is sacred. Everything has its price. Our pathetic politics imagine that equal access to the mechanisms of greed constitutes social justice. Our pathetic churches think that ministry is chaplaincy which bandages the human carnage of the globalization juggernaut. Our pathetic theology works at making the gospel palatable to taste formed by consumer choice. Our diminished hope is merely for the endless repetition of the same, since we are so frightened of anything as

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148 A point elaborated in the 3rd edn, Peters, *God*, pp. 134, 146.

149 Peters, *God*, p. xxvii.

150 Peters, *God*, p. xxvii.

terrifying as the new creation, with its apostolic entailment for our subjectivity, 'I am crucified to the world and the world is crucified to me'. How, our preachers wonder, could we ever sell that?

Just this dumbfounded perplexity at the word of the cross shows what prisoners of this plane of immanence we are, who hope only that nothing will really change for fear that serious change will be even worse than our endless repetition of the same. In this prison-house of body-and-soul, the only hope is for someone to break in and bind up its master to plunder his goods. Theology that is not deeply, pervasively, pointedly subversive in this way is for me quite pointless. I would like to think that Peters has come to the same view of our context, but of course he must speak for himself here as elsewhere to the issues I have raised.