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*Pro Ecclesia* is a journal of theology published by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. It seeks to give contemporary expression to the one apostolic faith and its classical traditions, working for and manifesting the church's unity by research, theological construction, and free exchange of opinion. Members of its advisory council represent communities committed to the authority of Holy Scripture, ecumenical dogmatic teaching, and the structural continuity of the church and are themselves dedicated to maintaining and invigorating these commitments. The journal publishes biblical, liturgical, historical, and doctrinal articles that promote or illumine its purposes.

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Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, therefore, the writer to the Hebrews says, "let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:1–2).

So the picture of "walking together" is perhaps too relaxed, too timid. For we who have been baptized are not on a leisurely stroll through the world. Like Bunyan's pilgrim we are to run with urgency and perseverance, undistracted by the allurements that we pass through. Our goal is the heavenly city whose architect and builder is God, and we are not to rest until we stand safely within those walls and take our place in the vast choir surrounding the throne of the living God.

We must also study and learn from the lives of the saints, those people from every century of Christianity: our people, our family, our companions on our pilgrimage with whom we are one in the communion of saints. These are *some* of our family. We ought to read about them; converse with them; learn from them; let them teach the riches of Church history; receive from them instruction in a life of surrender and obedience to the will of the Holy One. It is in such ways that God invades our lives, urges and persuades us to make the journey into his vast heart of love and join the company of those who surround the throne of God Most High.

There, with our family, we wait and we pray for those who come after us until in the fullness of time, all of God's creation is made new and complete and achieves the perfection which has been in the mind of God from before the foundation of the world. Then, as St. Paul says, Christ will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28; Eph 1:23; Col 3:11).

## REVIEW ESSAY

Paul R. Hinlicky

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Christine Helmer

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

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Christine Helmer is among the smartest and also feistiest theologians of our times. In her new book, she moves beyond the largely historical work, chiefly on Luther and Schleiermacher, to which she has devoted her talents, to set the stage for a fresh attempt at systematic theology. If the *de facto* schism that runs through contemporary Christian theologies and across denominational lines today lies in the cleavage between self-identified revisionists and those who intend orthodoxy, it behooves readers of *Pro Ecclesia* to take her argument in this book to heart. Her well-earned reputation as a scholar of liberal and contextual approaches to theology makes her movement in this book toward Karl Barth's theology (63, 151, 165) all the more significant. In my reading, she emerges in these pages as a Barthian "of a higher order"—if I may thus re-coin her beloved Schleiermacher's self-description as a "Moravian of a higher order"!

The plausibility of that claim may be seen in the book's central contentions. Theology is language about reality (134, 144). As language about reality, theology arises from the *Christus praesens* (43, 57, 113, 124). And because of the living experience of the *Christus praesens* in the transformed subjectivity of faith, theology is about the living God encountered in living history (61, 65, 69, 77, 87, 106, 144, 151–52, 160). The living God is the One who ever surprises us when we have locked God up in a closed and self-referential circle of inherited theological certitudes (105). Theology, to be sure, inevitably represents God in doctrinal formulations. But these historically contingent (though not fortuitous), locally and temporally

apt (but also humanly inept and so inadequate) formulations must be understood as timely, not timeless witnesses to the living God. It is this reference, not the representation, that counts.

What is essential is that doctrine *refers* to the living God and that we can, with the help of these witnesses, learn also to *refer* to God in the *hic et nunc* of our own theologizing. Doctrinal formulations arise historically as articulations of the multitude of non-identical repetitions of the foundational reality experience of the *Christus praesens*; thus they are capable of being recognized in all linguistic diversity as making the same *reference* in so far as they instantiate the same pattern of language-reality correlation. That correlation is Christianity's "central confession concerning Christ's unequivocally unique work of salvation that emanates from Christ's unequivocally unique person" (137). Given this Christological commitment, not to be gainsaid in today's environment, least of all in circles of self-identified revisionist theology, theologians who intend an ecumenically generous orthodoxy ignore Helmer's case at their own peril, even if entertaining it entails suffering definite provocations from which this passionate theologian is not known ever to shy.

Theology is not only talk about God in preaching and witness. It is, as just indicated, also about talk about talk about God in doctrinal theology. And further, it is talk about talk about talk about God in academic theological inquiry, such as fills Helmer's book, which, as mentioned, is a virtual prolegomena to a systematic theology. The first parts of Helmer's book, then, consist in scrutinizing talk about talk about God, in other words, querying the nature of doctrine, particularly in the Kantian epoch of theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This scrutiny takes the form of an inquiry into the "problem with Schleiermacher," centering in an analysis of Emil Brunner's 1924 indictment of Schleiermacher's "mysticism." This part executes a splendid genealogy which I will now briefly recount.

Helmer begins by identifying the fundamental problematic of Kantian theology as the nature—spirit relation, that is, the phenomenal—noumenal relation with respect to human consciousness (27, 36–37, 39, 46, 52). Theology after Kant cannot know (strictly speaking) the noumenal omnicausality that is God as such, but only its phenomenal effects in the feeling of absolute dependence as positively articulated in religious representations. All the same, this "total impression" is the reality pole in the language-reality relation that gives birth to linguistic representations.

In an illuminating analysis of Albrecht Ritschl, who historically links the Kantian turn of theology with Schleiermacher to the twentieth-century theologies of the Word, Helmer focuses in on Ritschl's modernization of the Lutheran Formula of Concord's repudiation of faith as regenerative union with Christ (i.e., the manifest meaning of Lutheranism's earlier Augsburg Confession and Apology, as rooted in Luther's

"joyful exchange," which Helmer discusses under the term "mystical union"). Ritschl's corresponding polemic against pietism evolved into the twentieth-century theology of the Word alone over against the "mystical" experience of the new birth (27, 30, 35).

By the time Brunner made Schleiermacher into the whipping boy of dialectical theology, however, the role of the Kantian categories of nature and spirit in theology as diverse ways of regarding one and the same world had been transformed into a dualism of different and indeed antagonistic spheres. Experience is now mere nature, flesh that avails nothing; it is the Word that alone is spirit and life. The Kantian distinction between two ways of regarding the one world in human consciousness had thus developed into a "bifurcation" that in rendering experience sinful idolatry made talk about God into something ghostly.

On the basis of this analysis of the twentieth-century separations of theological language from reality and doctrine from experience, Helmer proceeds to consider the conditions of talk about God, in other words, about the features requisite today for a better formulation of doctrine in systematic theology. Her claims here are always dialectical, perhaps overly so. Theology is *both* to "open" the way to God's speech (70–71, 169) *and* also to be generative of doctrinal production, or "acclamations," that articulate the experience of God in Christ according to a rule that enables recognition (133) of the same reference from case to case. As such theology is "grounded" in a Word that precedes (75), forming a "central confession" (137). Yet theology receives this preceding Word from God in the experiential encounter with Christ always in the social form of intersubjective listening (138, 167); this is a society that today has become global in scope (136). In this social matrix, theology is *both* claim to truth (165) *and* an open-minded act of inquiry (79–80, 83), *both* a cognitive act of interpretation (131) *and* a disputation with others (135). A capacious pattern, then, of "both/and" interlaces with the critical edge of *sic et non* in the sketch of a better systematic theology that the book develops. Helmer's claim to a *dialectical* approach (e.g., 11) along these lines, "inspired" by Barth in CD 1/1–2, runs through the length of the book but especially recurs and intensifies as she draws to a conclusion (140, 144, 152, 159–60, 169).

To alter only slightly a characterization of Karl Barth by Bruce McCormack (who endorses Helmer's book) by inverting the word order, Helmer emerges in these pages as a theologian who is "*both* modern *and* orthodox."

Modernity and orthodoxy—in that order. My *post-modernist* (that is, anti-Kantian) query now following, which I intend as descriptive and probative, not polemical or pejorative, hinges on the ways in which Helmer's book can both resource itself in Schleiermacher's foundationalist account of the genesis of doctrine and on the same basis articulate a trenchant critique of what she tags Bruce Marshall's "epistemic advantage" model of theological knowledge, in other words his claim that any conviction

to which a community holds, such that to abandon it would entail the dissolution of the community, has "epistemic primacy." Note well: I take Marshall's basic point here as an *analytical* truth and I distinguish that from the various ways that Marshall in fact deploys it for his own "constructive" (in Helmer's language) purposes which are in point of fact other than my own proposal for systematic theology as *critical dogmatics*.

Helmer's two moves here go together hand in glove; they betray the fact that Helmer, in following Schleiermacher on the origins of doctrine, is still thinking in the train of Kantian foundationalism in the sense that *epistemology*, rather than a non-foundationalist account of epistemic access that warrants but does not "ground" claims, qualifies her claim to Christian truth (her "orthodoxy," if she pleases) as *modernist* (not that she would regard that as a *problem* in the way that *this* postmodernist would). Indeed, she describes her work as doing epistemology in order to pass on to dogmatic content (145–46), which is all to the good; she explicitly denies, moreover, in a passage drawing on Luther (128–30) that new knowledge created in doctrinal production translates Christ into an alien genus rather than explicates Christ, who, according to Christianity's central confession, as already mentioned, is the agent that makes the language acclaiming Him acquire its new and fitting meaning (128–30).

Yet in the remarkably convoluted section that follows (132–34, in a book otherwise remarkable for its lucidity), Helmer makes Schleiermacher's reciprocity between person and work in Christ the "center of Christianity" and as such the positive "rule," established in the earliest layers of the New Testament, that "grounds" both biblical discourse and subsequent doctrine in a continuum: "The soteriological dimension of Christian discourse is reproduced in, although not produced by, doctrine because doctrine is grounded conceptually in the language-reality encounter between believer (or acclaimer) and Christ." This continuum, however, seems *circular*—a *vice*, not a virtue, in *epistemology*. Doctrinal predication of Christ as savior is not produced by doctrine because doctrine itself as reproduction is grounded in doctrine's relation to reality, which relation to reality predicates the reality of Christ as savior.

In this circle, does Christ ever get to predicate Himself? Or, does Christ ever get to be predicated by His Father or by their Spirit? Can the Word of God ever *disrupt* our perceived soteriological needs (cf. John 6:15) to speak in its *own* voice about our *true* need? Wouldn't such *divine* predications, for example, Luther's *Hunc audite!* (that Helmer so ably probed in her *Martin Luther and the Trinity*), rather ground and rule the discourse that is Christian, giving any and all of our acclamations that *new* meaning that *explicates* Christ as the righteousness of the coming reign of God and does not translate Him into another genus, just as the previous section drawing on Luther had seemed to indicate?

Of course, a claim for *divine* "grounding," that is, for a sovereign act of apocalypse, cannot do Kantian epistemological work and does not even want to do that. Perhaps sensing the difficulty, Helmer admits that her claim for epistemological grounding in the positive historical fact of an original correlation of person and work, reflected in an abiding language-reality pattern of doctrinal production, gives rise to the question how doctrine can be "open to novel predications in light of new encounters with the *Christus praesens* while continuing to be oriented by the parameters of original predication" (134).

Her answer is that this continuity is *historical*, not *apocalyptic*, a *Wirkungsgeschichte* not a *Pentecost* intervention in history. Grounded in the experience of Christ as savior originally attested in the earliest layers of Scripture, doctrine must now appear on a continuum with Scripture, as it were, *Scriptura prolongata et diffusa*. Soteriology, taken as the meaning of the Scripture "for me," in this way gives rise to Christology (120, 128), when the historically mediated subject, Jesus, is encountered in the varied contingencies of the infinity of human experiences of Him that generate "acclamation" (126). It is this *historical* proximity to Jesus (119), mediated by Scriptural texts critically understood, that is meant by the *Christus praesens*. Thus the production of doctrine, or predications, Christological titles comes about in a prolongation and diffusion of Scripture into novel formulations.

A *prima facie* objection to this procedure asks *logically* how the subject term, Jesus, remains stable and identifiable under the avalanche of acclamation (rather like the hailing of the crowds on Palm Sunday), when the equally primitive New Testament witness to the destiny of Jesus in His cross and resurrection has apparently *fallen out* of the account here. This evident objection, so far as I can see, goes without notice in Helmer's book. Beginning with David Friedrich Strauss and continuing on through Rudolph Bultmann, however, the *historical* objection to this procedure is that it yields little more than a mythologization of Jesus from out of the perceived soteriological needs of devotees. All the more so does Bonhoeffer's *theologically acute* objection apply that the appearance of Jesus in history, who died forsaken by His God and Father on the imperial stake, is *ambiguous*. "Cursed be he who dies upon a tree" (Galatians 3:13).

Despite my postmodern objection to her epistemological foundationalism, Helmer's underlying concern is that the experience of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the human subject not be abolished by a one-sided theology of the Word. I share this concern with Helmer, but I identify the problem as an insufficient Trinitarianism due to a Pneumatological deficit. That is to say, it is the Spirit's acclamation of the crucified Jesus in raising Him from the dead to the glory of the Father that constitutes the gospel of God (Romans 1:2–4). This Spirit-proclaimed gospel is the *Verbum*

*externum* by which transformative faith is given and so experienced and thus also normed. The *auctoritas normativa* of Scriptural doctrine follows from the *auctoritas causativa* of the Spirit's gospel predicating crucified Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. It is *this* proclamation that creates the theological subject in the fellowship of believers. The way forward in "doctrinal production," then, is to follow the Spirit's promised guidance of the fellowship of believers into all truth by His recalling of Jesus's word. That leading of the Spirit may be followed if the Spirit, not a ghost but the very Spirit of the Father and the Son leaves a definite track in the course of church history, understanding, to be sure, that church history is a journey still underway up to and including our own forward ventures in faithful theological production.

Thus I share also Helmer's insistence that the journey is still underway with the consequence that novel theological formulation is still required of the church in mission to the nations and further, that precisely as such, in its putative novelty, theology is a matter of *conscience* under the *judgment* of God. In this precise connection, Helmer's penetrating critique of Bruce Marshall's *Trinity and Truth* amounts to the charge that an arbitrarily fixed *representation* of God, a "package deal" without differentiation, comes to substitute for living *reference* to the living God. Indeed, Marshall's book is made to exemplify her chief indictment of current theology's loss of reality, the fault of which she lays at the feet of those who claim already to possess orthodoxy, concerned only with enforcing the authority of past theology rather than with the present challenge of witnessing the living God (105).

In self-proclaimed orthodoxy, ecclesiology swallows up God (102, 150), in a hopeless act of nostalgia (110) that in making truth self-referential (97) in truth sacrifices truth to power (168). The cogency of this critique, not to mention its passion, in my view, challenges Marshall to make his own response to it. I will say only this much (or rather, little) in Marshall's defense. In so far as Marshall does not share Helmer's epistemological foundationalism, her critique does damage but does not squarely hit the target. The damage is real. But she succeeds only in staking out an alternative path into an ecclesiology of globally metastasizing Protestant sectarianism (itself theologically riven by the conservative-liberal divide which her analysis too conveniently elides, since this cleavage thoroughly penetrates also Two/Thirds World Christianity). My own view, however, is that a Barthian of a higher order can do better than to confirm from the left *the same schism* that Marshall maintains from the right.

For my own part, then, I conclude by putting a question back to Helmer: Can church history, which otherwise forms the continuum from Scripture for the production of doctrine according to her scheme, be a pure contingency (149)? There are passages, indeed emphatic ones, in which Helmer clearly indicates that she thinks *not*, for example: "The

controversy regarding a Western imposition onto global predication cannot be solved by the prescription that non-Western predication must reject its Western givenness" (137). If the Spirit, as promised, has indeed accompanied the church in, with and under its manifest confusion and sinfulness, also then under the dark shadow of modern colonialism as also in medieval crusaderism, that givenness, so far as it concerns Christian doctrine, consists in a series of ecumenical doctrinal decisions that have been decided historically.

As such, these decisions of the still undivided Church continue to claim the conscience of all Christian theologians, who are not free-thinkers but freed thinkers. Such ecumenical dogmas are few in number and broad in scope, but anyone who intends faithfully to speak the gospel *hic et nunc* freely and joyfully adopts as rules of faith the canon of Old and New Testaments, the Trinitarian knowledge of God and Christ, and salvation by grace. Whatever novelties come about as such theologians strive to attest the living God *as so identified* by the actual, historical tradition of the Spirit's gospel, they will come in *terms* of, not merely in a *pattern* of, these doctrinal formulations.

When 1 John 4:1-2 tells us "to test the spirits," it *assumes* novelty or at least diversity in the theological expression and linguistic formulation as standard procedure. Doctrine, then, precisely in its novelty can be as *false* to the gospel as ecumenically understood as the self-righteous repetition of uncomprehended formulations from the past. In the final analysis, Helmer seems to endorse this requirement of critically testing dogmatic proposals: "the controversy of current global predication requires that necessary questions concerning the truth of specific predications be raised. The process of working out the truth of Christianity must be aimed at promoting a Christianity that is adequate to its claims of justification and justice" (137). The ambiguity lies only in the antecedent of the pronoun, "its," in "its claims of justification and justice." The claims of justification and justice are in the first place the claims of *God's apocalypse* of the Son to be received in the Spirit and only quite secondarily those of Christianity in its historically continuous but just so ambiguous reality.

One *dares* to speak dangerously in the name of God, also against the abuse of God's name, and to teach the difference, when thinking *after* the *disruptive* gospel. Such would be theology as *critical dogmatics*.