A Remythologized Theology? An Appraisal of Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s Communicative Theism

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Abstract: After “procrastinating in the prolegomenal” fields long enough, where, to our benefit, he has cultivated a robust theological methodology and a sophisticated evangelical hermeneutic, in Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and AuthorshipKevin J. Vanhoozer unpacks the ontology implicit in his previous works. The book is an ambitious attempt to, one the one hand, reclaim the biblical mythos, or plot line, as the starting point and source of one’s theological ontology, and, subsequently, to flesh out a communicative ontology attuned to the polyphonic nature of Scripture. In the first half of the paper I seek to present a detailed summary of Vanhoozer’s development of the doctrine of God as articulated in RT, while in the second half I offer a series of critical reflections on key areas in Vanhoozer’s “communicative theism,” focusing particularly on his “authorial analogy” (analogia auctoris) and its use in discussing the relation between divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Key words: mythos, ontology, communicative theism, remythologizing, authorship

Remythologizing theology—an intimidating, somewhat abstruse and theologically ambiguous title, one might say. Vanhoozer, however, considers it fitting once the confusion surrounding the notion of myth, or rather mythos has been cleared. This he attempts in the opening pages of the book. Readers are warned that remythologizing has nothing to do with Bultmann’s demythologizing project, but everything to do with Aristotle’s mythos, understood as “emplotted” story, “all the ways in which diverse forms of biblical literature represent, and render, the divine drama” (p. 7)—in other words, the polyphonic Scriptures.

Vanhoozer traces the history of the notion of myth, distinguishing between modern definitions, whether coming from the pen of secular anthropologists (E. B. Taylor, Primitive culture) or from modern theologians, especially Bultmann,³

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and ancient ones, particularly Aristotle’s *mythos*. Myth and *mythos*—a perfectly defensible distinction. One can nevertheless wonder how likely it is that the ancient, Aristotelian notion of *mythos*, which Vanhoozer seeks to deploy, will be able to trump the modern understandings of myth (i.e. fictional, “sacred story”). To illustrate the confusion a term like remythologizing may create we will mention one instance only. In *Speaking of God*, Stephen D. Long uses re-mythologizing as a label to describe the general tendency in modern and more recent theology to replace one way of conceptualizing God (i.e. in substantialist, Aristotelian terms) with another (i.e. relational, personalist, dialogical, perichoretic-kenotic). Although the reference to Aristotel’s *mythos* is well detailed in *Remythologizing Theology*, such a close proximity to Bultmann’s demythologizing and the kenotic-perichoretic relational theism he seeks to avoid renders the term somewhat confusing and thus less strategically useful.

Nevertheless, given Vanhoozer’s penchant for dramatic articulations of theology, it comes as no surprise that he defends Aristotle’s notion of *mythos* as “dramatic plot: a unified course of action that includes a beginning, a middle, and end.” Also, “Mythos concerns what people do and what happens to them; it is a story that concerns doers (agents) and done-to (sufferers)” (p. 5). Vanhoozer highlights a very important feature of *mythos*, namely the connection that exists between it (*mythos*) and “the way the action is rendered.” He adds the following clarification remarks: “Unlike myths that hide kerigmatic kernels under disposable literary husks, the form and content of *mythos* are integrally linked.” (p. 5-6)

What does Vanhoozer mean then by remythologizing and what does theology look like after it has attuned itself to the biblical *mythos*? Theology, simply put, is reasoned, scripturally based and informed reflection on the theodrama, “the story of how the Creator consummates His creation into a whole that is true, good, and beautiful as it is meaningful: a renewed and restored world, an abundant garden-city characterized by everlasting shalom.” (p. 327) A remythologized theology takes as its starting point the “interpersonal dialogue between God and human beings that the Bible not only depicts but instantiates.” (p. xiii) Acknowledging the fundamental fact that God is a communicative Triune being who eternally communicates life, love, beauty in the intra-trinitarian life, who has spoken “many times and in many ways” (Hebrews 1:1) through prophets, and supremely in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:2), the question to which a

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remythologized theology is the answer is: What must God be like (e.g. His being, attributes) if He is the communicative agent that Scripture depicts him to be? Thus, remythologizing seeks understanding by pursuing the ontological and metaphysical implications of the biblical images/metaphors, and the biblical mythos as a unitary whole. A remythologized theology is, in effect, a Scripture-informed and governed theology, attuned to and informed by the biblical mythos, that is, the theodramatic story line. Remythologizing theology is then about restoring Scripture as one’s interpretative framework and basis for metaphysics.

Vanhoozer poignantly argues that biblical descriptions of God’s action and passion are not simply accommodated language, to use Calvin’s long-standing notion, but the elevation of human words to divine discourse. God not so much accommodates to a poor language, but co-opts just this language, just these literary forms to communicate Himself adequately, yet not exhaustively. This is an intriguing, and dignifying reversal of Feuerbach’s charge against theology being the mere projection of humanity’s highest ideals. It is not humans who project themselves into God-talk, but God projects Himself in the biblical text, “from above.” God appropriates human forms—language, literature, the humanity of Jesus—in order to disclose Himself in dialogical interaction with His creatures, being fully Himself, wholly other, holy Author in our midst. (p. 489)

It may be worth noting here the ten theses on remythologizing that Vanhoozer presents at the beginning of his work. I have chosen to present them in my own words. I will expand on them and offer critical comments further on in the essay. RT is about recovering the biblical mythos, not a fall-back into a bultmannian understanding of myth. Thus it concentrates on God’s Triune being in communicative action and seeks understanding His being and attributes based on His own system of (theodramatic) projection in words, word, and Spirit. RT presents God engaging the world, and particularly humans, in communicative rather than causal fashion. It seeks to show how causation may be better understood in communicative, rather than mechanical terms. RT operates with and within a theodramatic framework. This means metaphysics, epistemology and ethics are accorded to the gospel mythos, not the other way around. Its ultimate goal is, as previously argued in The Drama of Doctrine, appropriate participation

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8 Remythologizing/remythologized theology. Henceforth “RT.”
in the divine drama, the communication of Word and Spirit. RT maintains Christ and the canon as the starting point for reflection on God, since these are the chief means of God’s self-presentation and communication. Such reflection is to be carried out in a way that respects the specificity and reality-depicting power of all literary forms in Scripture. RT is an exercise in biblical reasoning, starting from the diversity of biblical literary forms, points of view, and agencies at work in the theodrama, and laboring towards a dialogical systematics. In contrast to demythologizing, RT seeks the integration of exegesis, biblical and systematic theology through careful reflection on the notion and implications of conceiving God as a triune communicative being/agent.

He proceeds in the first chapter by presenting a “gallery of canonical exhibits” and “a miscellany of theological issues,” which arise out of these (and others, which the ones presented merely illustrate). These pertain to (1) the nature of God; (2) the God/world relation; (3) the theological interpretation of the Bible: (a) Active voice—God is a speaker; (b) The problem of anthropomorphisms and particularly antropopathisms; (c) The Creator-creature distinction; (d) The covenant Lord/servant relation; (e) The economic and immanent Trinity; (f) Time and eternity; (g) Passive voice (the possibility of God being not only an agent, but a patient, a fellow-sufferer).

Vanhoozer continues in chapter 2 with an assessment of classical theism. He investigates and, through careful reasoning, he rebuts the claim that its conceptual vocabulary used to describe divine perfections and the God-world relation is a pagan inheritance, a fall into Hellenistic Philosophy, an imposition of Greek-thought on Jewish categories of thought and representations which, it is argued by the likes of Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine LaCugna, and most notably Jürgen Moltmann, fundamentally distorts the picture of God as a personal, vulnerable, loving person who engages His creatures in a reciprocal, give-and-take relationship. He argues that although concepts like self-existence, perfection, immutability, impassibility, simplicity are not explicitly present in Scripture, they are adequate conceptual summaries of the nature of God and His

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relation to the world as presented in the biblical representations. He avers: “their explicit clarification and amplification required the conceptual midwifery of Greek philosophy.” (p. 82) Far from capitulating to Greek philosophical thought, Jewish (e.g. Philo) and Christian theologians, from the patristic writers to Scholastic Protestantism, used Greek ontological categories in a ministerial and missionary way, as to make the Gospel teaching intelligible and conceptually clear to audiences less familiar with the biblical representations. They did not abandon the specificity of the Christian narrative and allow it to be swallowed up in generic ontological categories belonging to foreign metaphysics.

The same cannot be said, however, of modern theology. Modern philosophical theism is indeed more susceptible to the charge of having fallen captive to Greek philosophical categories, argues Vanhoozer, since it has largely proceeded not from the canon but from the concept of an infinitely perfect being. (p. 94) This has resulted in a metaphysics controlled by the concept of perfection, foreign to the biblical representation, attributed to a generic being and espoused by purportedly generic human beings. It is precisely such a metaphysical enterprise which Feurbeach is right to unmask as mere projection of human aspirations.

In marked contrast, a remythologized theology will seek to move from mythos to logos, metaphysics, if metaphysics is understood to be simply the study of being, and will employ metaphysical categories in ministerial, rather than magisterial fashion, in order “to clarify the divine ontology implied by the words and acts of the triune God.” (p. 104) Such an endeavour Vanhoozer calls theo-ontology, as opposed to ontotheology (i.e. perfect being analysis).

A parallel trend in modern theology which Vanhoozer merely sketches, offering brief critical remarks is the renaissance of Trinitarian theology articulated in predominantly relational rather than causal categories. The immanent Trinity, shows Vanhoozer, is collapsed in the economic Trinity. This is demonstrably a fateful move which severely limits God’s freedom to be distinct from His creation and saving work (p. 109) and virtually eliminates the historically established transcendence-immanence distinction. Salvation history becomes God’s personal history. For Moltmann, a prominent representative of relational trinitarianism, the cross is an intra-trinitarian event, rather than the climactic redemptive-historical event. Sovereignty is really the power of suffering love. (p. 129) God is more a sympathetic lover alongside the world than Lord over it, affected in his being by it.

The key issue which Vanhoozer explores by investigating such proposals is their potential, or lack of thereof, for giving “a coherent account of the types of

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15 Moltmann, The Crucified God, 244.
special divine action—especially communicative action—that the Bible everywhere depicts.” (p. 134) In other words, the question is whether such construals of God’s being are faithful to God’s pluriform self-presentation.

Vanhoozer continues focusing on 20th century variations on relational theism (esp. panentheism, open theism, process panentheism), by examining how they construe (1) God’s personhood, (2) God’s love, and (3) God’s suffering. All relational theistic proposals share a group of principal ideas. First, the divine persons are not to be conceived in substantial but relational terms. Relations are understood to constitute being. Secondly, God’s love for the world is seen as perichoretic relationality. On this point it is worth noting the displacement of the notion of perichoresis from its proper dogmatic location in the immanent Trinity to the God-world relationship. God, in effect, ontologically depends on the world. Likewise, kenosis is removed from its historically established location in Christology and applied to the oikonomy. Divine love is understood to be a limitation of the sphere of divine action to allow for humans to exercise their libertarian freedom so that the God-humans relationship that ensues is personal, reciprocal, rather than casual, manipulative. As a result of this ontological vulnerability, God’s suffering is seen as a necessary consequence of His kenotic relatedness. His love is ontologically necessary, not free.

Relational theism, argues Vanhoozer, through its skewed emphasis on perichoresis as a fundamental mode of God’s relation to the world robs God of His distinctiveness, placing humans on the same ontological level with Him, thus rendering the drama of redemption superfluous at every one of its junctures. For if we are already in God, ontologically, through perichoresis, man’s separation from God is not sin and the solution, accordingly, need not be the Son’s Incarnation and salvation of humanity through His death and resurrection. Kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology, Vanhoozer’s somewhat abstruse phrase for the conceptualized theology proper after the relational turn, presupposes a cavalier reading of the biblical narrative and particularly the depictions of God’s nature and the nature of His relations to the created order. Relationality, we might somewhat oxymoronically say, is the new substance after theology proper has made the fatal relational turn in postmodernity. “Relations all the way down” is the cardinal dogma of the “New Orthodoxy.”

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Feuerbach’s trenchant critique looms large, for, he says, “the doctrine of Trinity is a projection of the human ideal of ‘participated life.’” (cited in Vanhoozer, p. 159)

Of course, one proper response to this conceptual shift is to stress that while the connection between a person’s being and his relations is indeed intimate, the two are nevertheless distinct. Being is not reducible to relations, although relationality is a fundamental dimension, even call of human beings.\(^{17}\) God himself, while in a sense relational, is more than He has revealed himself to be and more than His relations with the world. He remains prior to His relations and distinct from His creatures precisely in order to be the kind of God worthy of worship because of His great deeds for His people.

To avoid turning talk about God into anthropological projections, as Feurbach charges both classical theists and kenotic-perichoretic relational theists, we must orientate it on Christ. Theological discourse must be theomorphic, argues Vanhoozer, and must be informed not by our best human experiences, but by the recital of the economy of salvation. (p. 162) This a remythologized theology, as Vanhoozer repeatedly stresses, means “thinking God’s being on the basis of His communicative action whereby God does things in and through His Word and Spirit.” (p. 175) For Vanhoozer this means a conceptual retooling, a communicative variation on classical theism. This is precisely what he seeks to do in Part II of his book.

What Vanhoozer proposes in Part II is that we articulate our metaphysics by studying the biblical account of God’s speaking and acting. The first plank of Vanhoozer’s metaphysics of the theodrama is that God’s being is in His free, wise, and loving communicative agency. But His communicative activity is not limited to the God-world relation. God is and has always been a communicative triune being, where the Three Persons of Trinity have perpetually communicated themselves to one another in perfect communion. God is fundamentally a communicative being, who has spoken and acted in history and who continues to do so until now. We may understand Him by attending to the record of His speech and actions or more precisely, speech-acts, in Scripture. But since His self-presentation reaches its climax in the person of Jesus Christ, in His words and acts, theology must be thus orientated on Christ. Jesus is what Vanhoozer calls the analogia dramatis. His personal history, His speech and words, reveals God’s being. Instead of beginning with a generic “perfect” being in a bottom-up natural theological method, highly susceptible to the Feuerbachian critique, a remythologized metaphysics takes God’s being-in-communicative-act as its loadstar. Analogia dramatis is to be preferred over the analogia entis. Here

Vanhouzer seeks to move beyond Barth, arguing that although God reveals His being-in-act supremely in Christ, the proper context for understanding the incarnation, the singularity of Jesus Christ come down as God Incarnate, is the nexus of biblical revelation. Without the canonical Old Testament context, the singularity of the Christ event is bound to remain opaque. It is the prior revelation of God in the Hebrew Scriptures that makes understanding Christ possible. Christ then, as the supreme entry point for the knowledge of God is knowable within the canonical parameters. The canon as a whole, pointing as it does to Christ, is itself divine communication.

Vanhouzer avers that recasting ontology in communicative rather than instrumental causal interactions may supply us with an enhanced understanding of the triune God (chapter 5) and the God-world relation (chapter 6). He also suggests it may also aid and enhance our understanding of God’s passions/sufferings and love/compassion, and also of the life of the triune God and our participation in Christ.

Examining the God-in-communicative-action that Scripture presents one is faced with a triune God. Vanhouzer even goes so far as to say that the Trinity itself is the drama, “a doing than which nothing greater can be conceived; a ceaseless activity of communication that yields consummate communion.” (p. 243, 245) It is not clear, however, why drama must be used in such extensive way as to descriptively cover even the intra-Trinitarian life. This triune communicative God, avers Vanhouzer, is eternally light, life and love which he seeks to communicate to His creation. God’s purpose in the theodrama is to “restore the lines of communication that had broken down in order to effect union and communion.” (p. 280) On this view then, union with Christ, the agent of restoration and reincorporation, is not ontological but theodramatic. We are united with Christ not by being incorporated into His divine being, but by “christodramatically” participating in the redemptive activity of the triune God. The six theses that Vanhouzer offers to clarify what shape union with Christ takes in a remythologized theology, building on insights from Cyril, Calvin and Owen, are simply superb. Vanhouzer is careful and competent in distinguishing his position from other construals that merge God’s being with his communication. For Vanhouzer, God is more than he communicates freely. The economic Trinity communicates the immanent Trinity, is not identical to it (see Rahner’s rule). The God which has perfect light, life, and love in himself engages the world as communicative agent. The climactic communicative activity of God is the Son. He is the initiator or “author” (archegos) of Salvation

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18 See, for example, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I./2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 463.
according to Hebrew 2:10. God as author, naturally, presents a host of questions pertaining to His relationship to the world. It is in this sensitive and thorny area that communicative theism, argues Vanhoozer, can help illumine issues like the emotional life of God, the relationship between divine and human freedom.

In Part III of the book, in light of God’s speaking creation, covenant, and canon into being, divine authorship is presented as an apt aid for understanding the nature of the dramatic action outside (and inside) the world of the text, and thus a helpful heuristic device for grasping divine transcendence and immanence. (p. 305) Vanhoozer seeks to develop an understanding of God as author and tease out the implications such a construal has for the God-world relationship. God, says Vanhoozer, authors the world (transcendence), dialogues with the world (immanence) and authorially governs and cares for the world dialogically (triune providence).

The question immediately arises whether construing God as author is biblically warranted. In other words, is it yet another anthropomorphism, a metaphysical abstraction arbitrarily used to qualify the God-world/humans relationship, or a notion successfully deployed by Vanhoozer as a valid stand-in for the concept of Creator? Naturally, his entire remythologizing enterprise is built on the validity and usefulness of the analogia auctoris, hence one must inquire whether this conceptual retooling is indeed warranted. On the received, evangelical view, Scripture itself is a product of divine authorship. Life itself is authored, created by God. There was a time when humans did not exist, but the divine Author “wrote” them into existence. God, on this view, is the unauthored author—“I am who I am”—who is infinitely qualitatively distinct, wholly Author/Other from His authored, contingent “heroes.” Vanhoozer notes: “Authorship is the remythologized equivalent for expressing the so-called sovereignty-aseity conviction that ‘God is the one reality that exists a se (from and of himself) and is dependent on nothing outside himself for His essence and existence.’” (p. 485) Vanhoozer considers divine authorship to be not only biblically justified but the best construal of both God’s distinction and relation to the world, serving as the material principle of a remythologized theology. (p. 487)

Moreover, contends Vanhoozer, biblical discourse provides us with sufficient proof that God can indeed be identified as author. “To speak of God as Author of the world is merely to go with the grain of biblical discourse (Hebrews 11:3; cf. Genesis 1:1; John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16; Revelation 4:11).” (p. 485)

But what kind of Author is God then? Vanhoozer highlights the need for a robust concept of authorship that can give an account both of divine sovereignty and human freedom in the integrity of their relation. Vanhoozer is clearly exploring unmapped territories and is concerned to find a suitable model and
fitting categories that will not distort the fundamentals of orthodox faith. The Author that Vanhoozer has in mind is not the Tolstoy-like author of classical theism that is understood to be the first, absolute cause of everything that takes place in the world of the text, that leaves no room for the hero’s own voice, that operates through causal, coercitive, strategic action, and that does not do justice, argues Vanhoozer, to the dialogic nature of God’s interactions with His beings, as depicted in Scripture. Rather he proposes that divine authorship is best viewed in terms of communicative rather than strategic (causal; coercive) action, and that His communicative action is best understood in conjunction with Bakthin’s dialogic conception of authorship based on Dostoievski’s “polyphonic” novels. On this view, God’s Authorial word creates and sustains the universe; creates and sustains human asymmetrical dialogical partners or “heroes” with whom he dialogically interacts towards the testing of their freedom and the consummation of their existence. True freedom, it is argued, is not self-determination, but the capacity to respond in the affirmative to the divine call; not “I think, therefore I am” (Descartes), but “Here I am” (Samuel). In fact, there is no contradiction between Authorial determination (through effective dialogical persuasion) and self-determination (not to be confused with self-authoring!), argues Vanhoozer. It is precisely in dialogue with God that human beings exercise their freedom to realize their own voice-idea. In Pharaoh’s case, for example, the word of the Lord prompts Pharaoh to show his true colors by the pattern of his response. Vanhoozer notes that Pharaoh is consummated through the Word of Lord confronting him, which solicits his free, response: No. We note here the striking but nevertheless helpful conjunction between consummation, which may seem to imply one-sidedness, and free response, which indicates human freedom.

In a model that offers central place to communication, Vanhoozer presents the failure to realize one’s personhood as not hearing the voice of God. The hardening of heart is an exercise in training not to hear the call of God.

Vanhoozer speaks of divine sovereignty in terms of enabling and governing over human freedom. God enables the free response of man, through his two hands, Spirit and Servant Jesus. God opens us up, re-orient us to himself, catching us up into the theodramatic action which has Jesus at its centre. Here Vanhoozer’s Calvinistic roots come to the surface, as, even in a highly nuanced model that is deeply indebted to notions coming from literary theory, he ascribes

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ultimate determination/agency to God rather than humans. Specifically, it is God, through the “inner persuasive discourse” of Word and Spirit, who enables and stimulates the free response of man. Through the invariably effective and persuasive communicative action of God, through Word and Spirit, God is able to dialogically consummate individuals and nations alike.

Whence then does evil come from? Instead of presenting us with a theodicy, Vanhoozer encourages us to recognize that the theodramatic action is complex, calling for an elaborate system of rendition. Hence the different genres of the canon, each with its own conceptual framework. Moreover, the theodramatic action has multiple agents—supremely God, humans, angels and demons—performing at different levels (historical, psychological), calling for multiple points of view. “What we learn by looking through the various scriptural lenses is that there are different kinds of agencies working on multiple theodramatic levels.” (p. 354)

Remythologizing means respecting the multiplicity of layers, voices, agencies at work in the drama of redemption and particularly in the canon. “Certain aspects of the theodrama... come to light under some forms of biblical literature better than others.” (p. 350) In epistemological terms, no one conceptual framework is sufficient to explain or grasp the Truth. In the same manner, truth may be absolute, but our conceptual elaborations and conceptual frameworks are not. Hence we need more than one in each case to grasp, tentatively, partially, progressively the Truth, the meaning of the theodrama.

Specifically, evil ought not to be treated monologically as in a theodicy. Rather it should be approached in canonical fashion, by being attuned to the different “genre-ideas” in the canon. That is, we should observe and learn from the variety of literary forms that operate as the corrective lenses that enable us to see evil from different viewpoints. Indeed, the Bible contains forms of lament, exhort, praise, and console, all of which are ways of seeing and responding to evil.

It is, however, crucial that we maintain the fundamental conviction that God cannot be held accountable for infusing evil. God is not the author of evil/sin. But when sin has disrupted the relationship between God and His creatures, the Holy Author entered the theatre of the world, taking the form of a man to restore us to perfect communion with himself. “In this is love: that the Author, while remaining all that he is, nevertheless pours His uncreated self into created form and space, blood and bones, in order to communicate His light and life to others” (p. 358) so that communion is restored.

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Of all the different levels where action takes place, Vanhoozer argues that the level of human hearts and wills is the one where most action takes place (p. 356) through asymmetrical dialogue.

In a remythologized soteriology, God remains Author, Lord of His Word but also Lord over the hearing and salvific effectiveness of His Word. He governs both the Incorporation of His Word, both in the production of Scripture and in the Incarnation, and what Vanhoozer calls the “incardiation”—the writing of the true, good, and beautiful Word in the human heart. The hearts of readers receive the divine Word through the unfailingly effective, personal, dialogical ministry of the Spirit. While all human beings are capable of hearing the external, general call, through outward preaching, it is the Spirit which makes the call effective, rendering the divine discourse internally persuasive (a la Bakhtin) through an effective dialogical interaction. God, through His Spirit, operates not in a manipulative, strategic way, as a brute force, but as a properly communicative force (e.g. the “force” of a cogent argument), releasing humans so that they may freely respond to the Word that simultaneously constitutes them as new beings.

Probably the place where God’s communicative, dialogical action is most visible is in the area of prayer. “Prayer is the practical resolution of the theoretical problem of how to balance divine determination (i.e., authorial consummation) and human freedom (i.e., heroic consent).” (378) Prayer, avers Vanhoozer, is a human response to the divine summons to participate in the economy of triune communication. (p. 381) Prayer is primarily about answerableness to the divine calling and will, being the prime exhibit of the providential concursus of divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Providence, in a remythologized theology, is treated according to the principles already outlined above in discussing God’s interaction with human beings, namely persuasive dialogue. God does not move chess players in a manipulative way, but he does not “move” creatures at all, or simply inspires them, but efficaciously persuades them to move freely in the direction of His will. (p. 367) Vanhoozer asserts dual agency. “Divine providence is less a matter of God’s ‘strong right hand’ than of the Father’s two hands (i.e. Son and Spirit)—in a word, triune authorship.” (p. 367) God is able to work efficiently because he is placed on a different ontological level than His creatures-heroes. His operation is Authorial. He remains the Author, we the heroes (a dialogical take on Romans 9:20-21).

Vanhoozer thus attempts a construal of divine providence in communicative rather than causal terms. He shows how God directs His people through bona fide communicative acts. God directs the drama of redemption largely by

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23 Peter Geach, Providence and Evil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 58.
directing its company of players, those faithful members who make up the body of Christ, by *effectually prompting* them through the ministry of the Spirit.

Another serious challenge that a remythologized theology faces is that of moving from biblical representations of God’s emotional life to theological conceptualizations in such a way as to avoid the fall back into myth, where God is a being placed on the same ontological level as His creatures, but also the demythologizing move which denies God Authorial action in space and time. Vanhoozer shows how critiques of impassibility coming from the “new orthodoxy” are off target because traditionally understood, impassibility referred not to the absence of divine affections but to the impossibility of God being moved by external forces. (p. 396) Committed to upholding divine impassibility, Vanhoozer takes a cognitive approach to emotions, locking onto Robert Robert’s notion of emotions as concern-based construals. He sees emotions as intentional states (they are about something, they have objects). On this view, God’s affections are seen to be godly emotions, active *dispositions* to act in a particular way based on certain divine concerns. Vanhoozer’s spin on Robert’s cognitivistic, activistic account of emotions can be somewhat obscurely summed up like this: *Divine emotions are covenental concern-based theodramatic construals.* In simpler words, divine emotions are biblical construals—ways of grasping one thing in terms of another—that present God’s unswerving concern for His creature’s fitting participation in the theodrama. “God’s emotions proceed from His construals of the way in which human beings respond to His own words and deeds, the drama of redemption, especially as these come to a climactic focus in Jesus Christ.” (p. 413) Pa-thic attribution in the OT comes in a distinctly covenantal context. These are construals of the way in which the people respond to the word of God in the context of a loving covenant between Yahweh and them. God’s “emotions” are instances of *covenental affection.* (p. 414)

To give an example, Vanhoozer notes that expressions of jealousy are to be explained as follows: “Jealousy is the lover’s construal of the beloved as rightfully His own yet in danger of transferring his affections to the rival.” (p. 414) God’s construals (of the concern for fittingness of the human hero in the theodrama) are invariably true and His concerns constant. It follows that God’s feelings (“his concern-imbued redemptive-dramatic construals”) are as impassible as they are infallible: the *impassible feels.* (p. 415)

Something similar may be said of Jesus who suffers the tug of temptations as a divine person in His human mode of existence. (p. 425) The Son is impeccable

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but not impervious with regards to temptation. “Divine impassibility means not that God is unfeeling—impervious to covenantly concerned theodramatic construals of what is happening—but that God is never overcome or overwhelmed by these feelings such that he ‘forgets’ His covenant, or who he is as covenant Lord.” (p. 433) God is self-moving based on His covenant. God is compassionate insofar He directs/communicates His goodness to those suffering. (p. 434) Seeing all of reality _sub specie theodramatis_, God is compassionate in an active way. He is not a fellow sufferer, passively contemplating His creatures’ suffering. Divine compassion is kyriotically. He has compassion as sovereign Lord. But then the question arises: why does not God put an end to suffering? Vanhoozer hints in the direction that God chooses to withstand His creatures in their freedom. “God’s patience is His free decision to make room for creaturely freedom.” (p. 450) Yet as he does this, nothing that His creatures do will deter Him from His purposes with them being perfectly accomplished. The church, the theatre of the Gospel, rejoices in suffering “in the realization that one has been given the privilege and responsibility of playing a part—that of the faithful disciple—in the drama of salvation.” (466) Suffering is thus but another way of demonstrating faithfulness.

In the final section of his comprehensive volume Vanhoozer reconsiders at greater length the authorial analogy. Referring to the thickly anthropomorphic language a good part of Scripture contains, he highlights the need for proper interpretative criteria. The Reformation’s cardinal hermeneutical principle is identified as one particularly helpful reference: Scripture interprets Scripture, and the literal sense has primacy. As he has cogently and comprehensively argued in _Is There a Meaning in This Text?,_ the literal sense is simply the sense of the literary act.\(^25\)

Narrative depictions of God must be interpreted in light of the more metaphysical statements (e.g. I am who I am—Ex. 3:14) and metaphysical attributes are simply distillations of His “biblically-attested theodramatic capacities.” Paul Helm, in his review of RT is therefore wrong in assuming that Vanhoozer has skated over what he calls the “one liners,” that is “short statements about God... which, even when they are de-dramatised, express permanent truths about God, truths which transcend both actions of the divine drama and conversations between God and man.”\(^26\) In fact Vanhoozer agrees that such metaphysical statements should act as a control in interpreting other

\(^25\) Kevin J. Vanhoozer, _Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge (Landmarks in Christian Scholarship),_ 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2009), 304.

types of biblical discourse. Likewise, the narrative form of the theodrama informs the metaphysical categories and conceptualizations properly descriptive of God’s nature and capacities, contra the proponents of the thesis that western theology is conceptually enslaved to Greek philosophical categories. Metaphysics has thus a ministerial, rather than a magisterial role in theology. It is successful insofar it aids the understanding and elaboration of some aspect of the triune economy, that is, the biblical mythos.

We appreciate the emphasis on God as communicative agent engaging His creatures through persuasive dialogue. The _analogia auctoris_, as presented in RT, presents however a few limitations. Since he has chosen to make use of Bakthin’s model of dialogical authorship, we wonder, maybe naively and ignorantly, how meaningful is it to speak about the author dialoguing with his characters? How are novelistic characters free, in any substantial sense of the term? Are they not puppets at the sovereign hands of the puppeteer, to change metaphors and refer to the offensive characterization of Reformed conception of sovereignty?

It is ironical that, one the one hand, Vanhoozer is accused by those in the Reformed camp (e.g. Helm) as steering dangerously towards panentheism, yet on a closer look, his authorial analogy, properly examined, involuntarily moves his proposal much closer to classical theism. His treatment of Author-hero interaction seems to skate over the basic insight that a massive ontological wall exists between the world of the text, populated with characters, and the world of the author that moves in absolute freedom and whose writing, it seems to us, unilaterally determines the action and the characters of the novel. And it is here that we might have the heart of the problem. The _analogia auctoris_, we believe, suffers because it is developed in a model of novelistic authorship, rather than theatrical. Again, this is strangely ironic considering Vanhoozer’s preference for the dramatic model amply developed in his _The Drama of Doctrine_. We dare suggest that theatrical authorship would have been a more suitable direction to develop the _analogia auctoris_, since it might have allowed for a more meaningful account of Author/playwright/director-actor interaction and of the performative/improvisational freedom of players.

There are other significant advantages of conceiving God as a divine playwright, as opposed to a generic or novelistic author. First, the dialogical nature of a play accords with the notion of God as the one who acts communicatively. There is also the significant explanatory power of the notion of God as divine playwright with regards to the immanent and economic Trinity, revelation and the ontological primacy of God the Author. A human

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playwright, while revealing much about himself and his intentions, purposes, and attributes, nevertheless transcends his script/drama/production. The playwright is more than the play and is ontologically distinct from his play. The Creator-creature distinction fits naturally within this framework. It would indeed be somewhat childish to presuppose that, first, the playwright has fully emptied himself in his script, and, secondly, that interpreters may fully and immediately grasp the totality of the playwright’s being and purposes. He is, naturally, more than his drama discloses about himself. Nevertheless, there is a close and intimate connection between his being and the script, which is reliable for partial, yet increasing knowledge of the playwright. But knowledge of the script should not be conceived in terms of scientia, theoretical, detached knowledge, but in sapientia, wise-action-oriented knowledge. Knowledge of the Divine Playwright means acting in sync with his purposes, participating fittingly in the unfolding drama which he sovereignly directs through his “two hands”: Word and Spirit.

Concerning the notion that God engages his creatures dialogically, not causally, strategically, we sense this dialogical persuasion model for salvation risks making humans co-authors with God of their salvation or placing unduly emphasis on their participation in the process of salvation. As Helm points out, Vanhoozer skims over the stage where, dead in our sins, we are incapable of communicating with God, where no amount of persuasive, dialogical interaction between us and the Spirit will make us alive. At this stage, God’s action must be manipulative, strategic, and pragmatic rather than dialogical, inter-personal, relational. Helm illuminatingly inquires whether a person who drags a drowning person out of the water and pressing rhythmically and forcefully on his chest to bring him back to life operates in a manipulative, strategic or personal action, to which the answer is both! The same can and must be said of conversion. Dead in our sins and trespasses, we are brought to life in spite of our inability to dialogically interact with God. To be entirely fair, however, Vanhoozer does mention that God’s effective calling is His restoring and reorienting those spiritual and cognitive capacities taken captive to an unclean spiritual and cognitive environment. (p. 375) But this feels like a fuzzy way of referring to the unregenerate condition, especially given the strength of the biblical metaphor (i.e. dead in our sins). On the same point, he says: “It is through the process of dialogical consummation that human beings freely realize their personhood. Triune dialogical consummation is a matter of God’s acting not on persons but

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within and through them in such a way that, precisely by so acting, God brings them to their senses and makes them into the creatures they were always meant to be.” (p. 371, italics mine) Or, in the final pages: “The efficacious inner persuasive discourse of word and Spirit ultimately move the heart, but in a properly communicative rather than manipulative fashion.” (p. 494) We might then say, in Vanhoozer’s defense, and qualifying Helm’s critique, that Vanhoozer has chosen to focus on the “mechanics”—for lack of a better term—of regeneration, whereas Helm, in his critique, focuses on the moment in regeneration where the soul is helpless to produce its own life and is therefore acted upon unilaterally, causally-personal. Both are dimensions of the mysterious process through which God saves people, restoring them to a life of communion with Himself and enabling them to participate in the ongoing theodrama.

What Vanhoozer does not tell us, however, is if the divine dialogical activity affects both the elect and the non-elect in equal measure. Of the non-elect, what would we say in communicative terms? That they freely chose to resist the dialogical activity of the Spirit? Whence the strength to resist it? That their “true personhood” is that of the non-elect and consequently that God will pass over them?

By way of conclusion we might simply say that Vanhoozer has managed to tread the narrow via media between too ready and too reticent speech of God, between the mythic/mythological cavalier speech about Him and the mystical silence. He has indeed shown us what can be properly said of God and his interactions with the world once we have attuned ourselves to the biblical mythos.

The triune Author-God Vanhoozer has presented in his volume is fundamentally a communicative being whose primary mode of interaction with his creatures is dialogue. He relates to human beings personally, dialogically, effectively and triumphantly as the sovereign Author. The purpose behind his communicative action is ultimately restoring communion with his creatures and enabling them to fittingly participate in the great drama of redemption which he has authored and which he continues to direct. A final thought on this point. It is somewhat disappointing that Vanhoozer has not sought to make more explicit connections between the theodramatic model for theology advocated in The Drama of Doctrine and the remythologized doctrine of God presented in RT. No attempt has been made, for example, to link the remythologized God with his role as Playwright/Protagonist/Director of the Divine Drama. We have already hinted at the potential explanatory benefits a properly dramatic conception of authorship may have for key loci in theology. But maybe this is asking too much from a volume such as this one, which has attempted to cover immense
theological ground. This might well be the task of future fellow remythologizers.

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