

Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), pp. 539 + xxv, Hb ISBN 978-1-4514-8284-3, eBook ISBN 978-1-4514-9665-9, no price

Many debates in contemporary theology can be interpreted as revolving around questions concerning the doctrine of God and, with it, the way in which we are to construe God's relationship to the world, the way in which we are to understand 'the world', and the ways in which God may be spoken of faithfully. Anglican liberal theology of the last century – for example, the outstanding work of Maurice Wiles – tended to a relatively parsimonious doctrine of God, motivated as it was by the rather minimal affirmations a theologian could make in what was taken to be a philosophically justified way. It was not by accident that something like Deism was often the result. "Narrative" theologies – such as those of Barth, Moltmann, and Jenson – eschew the God of the philosophers and develop their doctrine of God from the Christ-event or, more narrowly, from the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. These approaches are robustly Trinitarian and seek to be guided by what the church receives as orthodoxy, but their "dramatic" structure can obscure the divine unity, and they can be regarded as sometimes blurring the distinction between God and the world. The question which arises is how to uphold the unity and aseity of God whilst allowing proportionate attention to the *dramatis personae* of salvation history.

Katherine Sonderegger's two volume systematic theology is of particular interest because in this, its first half, she aims to develop a doctrine of God that is focussed on and controlled by the divine unity (the second volume will address the doctrine of the Trinity), but she does so by taking her lead principally from Old Testament narratives rather than those of the New. Although Jesus Christ does not drop from view completely, the "drama" takes on a rather different character, and the doctrinal topics examined, like the conceptual problems discussed, remain substantially those that are generated for Christian readers of the the New Testament. So, as the author acknowledges, 'this dogmatic volume cuts against the grain of modern Protestant dogmatics': 'it will be the aim of this dogmatics to honour Christ throughout a doctrine of God that is nevertheless not grounded nor derived from His

incarnate life' (p. xvii, *sic*, also p. xxiii, n. 5). The reason? 'It is by setting forth the Divine Perfections, by allowing ourselves to glimpse how Scripture tells us *Quid sit Deus* that we recognize and bow down before the One God, incarnate' (p. xviii). This book sets a very intriguing prospect before its readers.

Sonderegger seeks to display and to commend many virtues of theological reflection and writing. Resolute in her focus on God and at pains to avoid idolatry, she draws deeply upon Scripture and is animated by a strong sense of wonder at what it attests that God has done (the phrase 'How can these things be?' recurs frequently), she engages with a broad range of Christian tradition from both East and West and is even-handed in her criticisms of those with whom she disagrees. The book presents a strongly positive theology. It fiercely resists the apologetically motivated philosophical scruples that bedevilled twentieth century liberal theology, and its author takes up the founding posits of Christian faith boldly and directly. Sonderegger is impatient of settling methodological questions in advance, as though they could be treated in a neutral space independently of the exposition of the matters of doctrinal substance that motivate them: she allows the topics of fundamental theology to emerge through, and to receive attention in, the course of her constructive work .

Despite the general attractiveness of this approach, I have found this an unusually difficult book to digest. There are several reasons for this. The book is simultaneously interested in many topics which jostle for the author's and the reader's attention, which can be distracting for both. Clear summaries of the main direction of the argument and of the principal points established would have been very helpful. The author coins several technical terms and phrases which she relies on to do a lot of conceptual work and frequently appeals to as short-cuts to avoid encumbering the text with detail, but the reader has to wait many pages for them to be elucidated, and until they are he or she must take on trust that the phrases convey cogent content. (For example, the concept of a 'Transcendental Relation' is sketched in the Preface and is appealed to on p. 88, but it is not discussed in full until p. 451.) The book contains an index, but it is not as helpful as the book deserves: as I shall discuss below, pantheism is an important theme, but it has no entry.

There are in my view, however, two principal difficulties with the book: the conceptual problems that arise from trying to make sense of a writing style which, whilst vivid, is not particularly clear, and the way in which the author consciously brackets Jesus Christ from view and depends so heavily on the Old Testament. (Sonderegger acknowledges on p. xvii that 'this move away from Christological grounding and concentration marks a sharp break from the contours of and method of most Western theology, Catholic and Protestant alike.') The issue here is that she does this whilst presuming (and affirming) much that has been said only by *Christian* believers in the God of the Hebrew Bible, and only in the wake of there being a doctrine of the Trinity defined on the basis of the problems posed for Christian understanding of God by the New Testament's witness to Jesus Christ. For example, at the beginning of the book we are told that 'the hearing and picking out of the proper subject matter of Scripture, as with Scripture's pattern, is a communal, *ecclesial* act; but even more, it is a matter of the working of the *Holy Spirit*' (p. 13, emphasis added). Yet on the next page, the author writes that 'we discern in Scripture its proper heart and subject matter: the Oneness of God' (p. 14). One wonders who the 'we' denotes here. And how, if discerning the subject matter of the Bible is the work of the Holy Spirit, can 'we' be so sure that the subject matter of Scripture is the oneness of God? – Not that it cannot be, but Sonderegger seems to be affirming a threeness (or at least, a twoness) as a condition of identifying the oneness, which strictly, as I understand Sonderegger's project, we should not. Perhaps these difficulties will be resolved in the second volume.

Pursuing her focus on the Old Testament (and coincidentally demonstrating the way that she brackets Jesus Christ from view), Sonderegger explains that 'the mysterious bedrock of all theological reasoning' is the theophany at Horeb to Moses, 'the prophet without parallel in Israel's history' (pp. 80, 11). She builds much on this episode, notably what she calls 'theological compatibilism'. By this phrase, Sonderegger summarises her view that the utterly transcendent God of Scripture can dwell with his creation and remain himself without becoming assimilated to it – just as the fire can burn without the bush being consumed. To quote Sonderegger's definition of the phrase, 'God's Aseity is present and disclosed and known within our

earthly words and world and signs' (p. 77). God's invisibility and omnipresence are not *incompatible* – as Sonderegger worries we could think – nor his aseity and his knowability by humans. This has important implications for Sonderegger. For one thing, 'The God-world relation ... cannot be fundamentally *paradoxical*. We do not face the dilemma of uniting a God to our cosmos who cannot in truth or fact be so united... [N]ot for us the saying, that which cannot be, is' (p. 82). These statements are tolerably clear, but serious conceptual difficulties arise when we try to understand what Sonderegger means by them in the context of other things she writes.

She seems to have questions of ontology and of theological language in mind in the passages just quoted, but it may be that they are being confused. On her view, humans are capable of speaking of God because 'God dwells with us, in our words, our very thoughts' (p. 86). Thus, '[w]hen we confess that God can be compared with no idol, that He is unique, invisible, Mystery, we *lay hold of* God's own Aseity. These words are true of God, not simply our experience of Him' (p. 88, emphasis added). Because God dwells with us, our language is capable by God's grace of reaching out to God, we can refer successfully to him and, it seems, can grasp him. Nevertheless, Sonderegger also cautions that 'Theological compatibilism does not underwrite a coarse univocity in divine predication, *as if we understood, won through to, and comprehended the Divine Aseity when we name Him present to thought*' (p. 87, emphasis added). Taken together, these statements lead the reader to the view that for Sonderegger it can be true both that our words lay hold of God's aseity, and that we do not thereby comprehend ('grasp') God's aseity. Perhaps what she means here is that we can refer to God as God is in his immanent being, but not fully (or perhaps even partially) understand the one we refer to. This reading receives some support from her statement that 'God just is Mystery: that is His Being... It is *communicated* to our hearts and to our intellects; yet never *identified* with them' (p. 88). In a similar way, on p. 96, she tells us that 'God *commandeers* our thought', though '[t]here can be no ... conceptual apparatus to render such commandeering ... intelligible. It really is just impossible that the Christ child should be laid in ... a manger, bedded down in such lowly straw. Yet it is so.' So far so good, but the last two sentences quoted generate their own puzzles.

When Sonderegger writes that it is impossible that the Christ child should be laid in a manger but that it is so, she seems to be referring to the incarnation. Why is this 'just impossible'? We are not told, but presumably because it poses the question of how the Word or Son can be, or have been, 'identified' with the human flesh of Jesus Christ. Yet against the drift of this interpretation, we have seen that according to Sonderegger, whilst God's being is communicated to human hearts and intellects it is 'never identified with them'. The two sentences quoted at the end of the previous paragraph seem to have led us to a contradiction – the being of God is and is not to be identified with human heart and intellect – unless, on the other hand, Sonderegger means to deny that the Word identified itself with our flesh.

But let us grant Sonderegger the statements that 'it really just is impossible that the Christ child should be laid in ... a manger... Yet it is so.' The next puzzle the reader faces is what sense is to be made of the statements we are analysing given that a few pages earlier Sonderegger seems roundly to have renounced paradox: 'Proper theological method is neither paradox nor idolatry', and 'not for us the saying, that which cannot be, is' (p. 82). Perhaps what Sonderegger means by her apparent renunciation of paradox is that reality can so exceed our conceptual grasp that we are compelled to resort to paradoxical language in order to express what has happened in Christ, though reality is not at odds with itself, which paradoxical language could – mistakenly – be taken to imply. If this is what she means, it would have been helpful to have been told plainly; if not, the reader could be inclined to think that beneath the impassioned rhetoric (which is not a fault in itself) there lurks conceptual muddle.

The relationship between author and reader ought to be reciprocal; clarity of expression should be matched by charity of interpretation. But my difficulties reading this book were only deepened when on p. 76, in a statement about her ontology, the author advertises the possibility that her theological compatibilism may 'in the end prevent us from distinguishing ... the metaphysical Reality of God as Object from our own earthbound objects, animate and inanimate'. This sentence poses two questions as to the author's meaning: "Does her compatibilism prevent us distinguishing two kinds of reality: the kind that God is from the kind that characterises earthbound objects?" Or perhaps we should ask ourselves, "Does her theological compatibilism

prevent us from distinguishing God from earthbound objects, as though both belonged to the same ontological genus?" Christian doctrine is familiar with the problem of distinguishing kinds of reality, and it much preoccupied the early church. The problem is real, but it is one that Christians have learned how to live with. In contrast, being prevented from distinguishing God *qua* object from everyday objects is altogether different. The former reading of Sonderegger is clearly consistent with a doctrine of divine aseity that is implied by the asymmetry between God and the world in the doctrine of creation out of nothing. The latter looks much closer to a version of pantheism, which Christians have treated with suspicion since their earliest interactions with Stoicism. Now Sonderegger is clearly a Christian theologian, so charity requires that we adopt the first reading. But charity seems confounded when she emphatically states that 'God just is His own relation to the world' (p. 79, also p. 353), for here we seem to be closer to pantheism than to creation out of nothing and its denial that God's relation to creation is a 'real relation'.

It is clear throughout the book that Sonderegger does not mean her doctrine of God to be taken to be pantheistic, but she is so keen to stress God's presence to the world that at times a pantheist reading of her argument can seem very plausible. This door was formally closed to Christians by reflection on the implications of the Christ event for how the relations between God and the world should be construed, and by the development of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in particular. So I wonder whether a more steady focus on what Christians see as the culminating disclosure of God's relationship to his people in Jesus Christ (and, in addition to the prophetic witness, attention to the apostolic also) would have made Sonderegger's – and her readers' – conceptual work more straightforward.

Sonderegger is on to something very important in aiming to recover the centrality of the divine unicity to the doctrine of God. As things are, the lack of clarity in her writing and the conceptual muddle which ensues (for this reader, at least) generate substantial problems. She describes the approach we have been examining as 'relationalist', and she goes on to caution that 'Always the danger of pantheism lurks in relationalism of this kind. The world becomes necessary to God, as His own metaphysical Attributes are given only in relation to creation. No creature; no Divine

Invisibility. Yet just this is what we affirm when we endorse compatibilism in Christian knowledge of God: the realist Attributes of God are compatible with their being disclosed and named within the thought and life of creatures. So, we ask again, how can these things be?' (p. 95)

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