AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

Thank you, Erin Lothes Biviano, Ilia Delio, Gloria Schaab, and Matthew Ashley, for your thoughtful responses to my work *Faith and Evolution*. I am impressed with the careful, well-written, and analytical work that went into each one. I feel privileged to have an opportunity to enter into conversation about a work when theologians often feel that what they write passes into the void. I hope I understand most of the questions posed to the text. My goal here is to expand, explain, or adjust my positions so that the questions draw out a clearer understanding of the subject matter. Or, in Matt Ashley's language, to put more judgment in my calls. The best way to do this would be a live conversation rather than what may seem like pronouncements, but we will have to make do.

I begin by stating in a direct way the goals and the motivation of the book. This will serve the readers of this symposium who have not read the book and reiterate a context for my input into the conversation. Occasionally, I felt that the intention of the whole might have been lost in the reference to discrete ideas.

Although the title tends to narrow this work down to a dialogue with science (or evolutionary sciences), it is actually a work in theology that uses the picture of the world provided by the sciences as a foil for reforming theological language. It is not a book on science but a book on theology. More narrowly still, it focuses on the doctrines. Theologians write about so much else that the latent power in the confessed doctrines of Christianity lies lifeless in archaic formulas, sometimes embarrassingly so. The book primarily addresses Christians who are conflicted because they do not know how to handle problems caused by what science seems to propose. The central content of the book, expressed by the subtitle, consists of posing the doctrine of creation out of nothing as central in the Christian vision. Many lines from the periphery of the vision point inwardly to this center. This conception of God as immanent takes its Christian form from the Jesus-doctrine of grace, and it radiates outward in a Christian naturalism that floods all the sciences with humane theistic wisdom.

Erin Lothes nails the intention of the book perfectly: a short book in comparison with its scope; a concise work given the complexity of the issues; a visionary book that draws the tradition forward into new open space. This naturalism does not attack Christian spirituality but supports it when so many are abandoning affiliation with the churches. I want to be aligned with Ilia Delio in a desire to propose a meaningful Christian faith in our context and with Matt Ashley that it support faith life. But do not all of us feel stymied in the attempt to do both, even when with Gloria Schaab one recognizes that there will be losses and gains?

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I use classic moves to negotiate the impasse. One is to distinguish between faith and beliefs and, correspondingly, revelation and its expression in language. A second, drawn from Dennis the Areopagite, says that everything we affirm of God has also to be denied because God is absolute incomprehensible mystery. A third is drawn from Paul Ricoeur, and its simplicity confounds its depth: there are two levels of religious language, the one, spontaneous common expression shared by a community, the other, reflective language of the discipline of theology. The two are distinct: for example, I have never read a criticism of Thomas Aquinas' definition of God as the pure act of being by those who use the prayers ascribed to his authorship. A fourth is implied in the term "dialectical," which frequently appears on my screen. I mean something deceptively simple, namely, holding together two ideas that do not quite fit together. Sometimes this remains paradox, but the mutual embrace can also be dynamic as this symposium itself may show.

These four principles do not bring you home, but they take you pretty far down the road. Aquinas' use of the second axiom was radical: we do not really know anything about God in any common sense of the term "knowing." Ricoeur's principle unmasks the ploy of comparing the reflective knowledge of science against the spontaneous language of religion. So much good time wasted on such an obvious fallacy in writers like Richard Dawkins, who precisely and deliberately(?) confuses the common baby language of religion with critical scientific language. Ashley wants to fight with the reductionism of some scientists. I do not intend to give the impression that I approve of it, but I do not turn to scientists for their theology. I interpret E. O. Wilson's argument on innate human aggressiveness as saying, "take a look." Take a close look and we will see that it by no means rules out the innate desire to love and for communion. We are complex.

I turn now to three issues that were mentioned more than once in the four reflections. One is the correlation of the ideas of presence and personhood in relation to God; another is the idea of God's intervention into the world of finite events and how the idea of God as Presence relates to it; a third is the idea of the self-limitation of God, where I was so rash as to call this a bogus idea. It turns out that it was a considered judgment based on basic principles.

But first, I want to engage the description of the work by Ilia Delio because she seems to be writing from a perspective that is different from the book and the other voices in the symposium. I think of that perspective as more embedded in the world of science than I was able to go and less focused on the constructive theological logic of my text. For example, I *am* attentive to the philosophical shifts in language necessitated by a scientific worldview, and

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these are stated in the first two chapters and constantly reiterated. I do not minimize the fact that science rarely explains things in terms of causality (18), and I do not turn to causality as the matrix of my theology. Aquinas' notion of primary causality is classic rather than medieval; I am not surprised when evangelical theologians turn to Aquinas on creation. "Primary causality" precisely is not any causality that we know, certainly not the first cause in a line of causes. It is rather absolute mystery and merits the negation of any conception we have of it as cause or a cause. The book does not ignore process theology, but in fact is totally a work in process theology where all reality is relational and interconnected and in constant movement; reality is a narrative not in time but constituted by time. I *do* consider the rise of consciousness and differentiate it from the rise of moral sensibility. But Delio is right about one thing: I have not entered into the new and complex world of artificial intelligence.

My sense of her comments leads me to think that Delio's desire for "a whole new paradigm for religion" carries with it a constructive ideal of what that paradigm will look like. It will move from a base that carries more scientific content than I have or could have marshaled in this work. My blessings on that work; we will all benefit from it.

God as presence and person. This is not the first problematic notion that arose in the lineup of the reviews, but it embraces the other two. Matt Ashley frames the problem of "presence" language for God versus "person" language, noting that, overall, I am concerned about anthropomorphism. The debate relates to fittingness not coherence: whether or not person language is more fitting theologically than "presence" because both have to be understood dialectically (i.e., mediated through negation). But "God as a person" is closer to the practice of prayer and the experience entailed in it. Who wants to argue against that, especially when accompanied by his concisely stated arguments? So, I agree. But I will add that the symbol "presence" has a deep personalist dimension that appears in personalist philosophy. Presence often refers to a special quality of one person's being with another at a completely different level than the physical. At this point "a person" and "presence" resonate.

I also want to restate my case against anthropomorphism. On the one side, anthropomorphism characterizes all language referring to God when God is conceived as personal; it is inescapable. But if it is not recognized and attended to, all the rhetorical questions posed by Ashley may be turned against his position and into human frustration. The issue of anthropomorphism has to be addressed. Ricoeur is right: after criticism there remains a second naïvete that requires more reflection. In some cases, it may *not* be "important for theology to stay close to the ground, as it were, and maintain

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language of God as *a* person." I absolutely honor the expostulation of Job, but God answered him with an assertion of absolute mystery.

There is another reason that supports "presence" language against "a person" language that stems from another role that theology plays in the public area that is in contrast with its role as the critical language of the community. Theology bears witness in our time and has to speak in a public language. On the one hand, this is not a small role in the Christian intellectual tradition. On the other hand, it is always accompanied by an anti-intellectual shadow: I would rather feel God's presence than define it. For this reason alone, this discussion and the ones that follow matter.

Presence and intervention. Lothes generally approves of the language of Presence but does not want God to be a bystander, one who oversees, perhaps even accompanies, but does not do anything. She does not accept the term "intervene" but wants God to have some active role in the unfolding of the universe and history. She wants God here and now doing something! She turns to Denis Edwards and John Polkinghorne as non-interventionists who still make God active in the present: the "*Creator's kenotic love includes allowing divine special providence to act as a cause among causes* (Polkinghorne)."[33] Schaab too wants a God who, without intervention, still does something beyond watching and accompanying; she too wants directing, if not decisive, action without intervention.

I appreciate this dilemma and I do not resolve it as stated, other than saying that God does not act as a creature acts. I am not sure what Polkinghorne means by God being a cause among causes, but I do not accept the idea that God acts in the world as a finite being. But without solving this problem, I approach it differently from the way it has been implicitly formulated; that is, how can we fit God into the world? By contrast, I begin with the world as a place of unnecessary and innocent human suffering and malpractice and death; that is a given in our experience. That negative experience raises the question of the intelligibility of existence itself, its coherence by a logic of human expectation that reaches beyond immediacy. It is in answer to this question that God makes sense. God does not stand accused by what we perceive, even though a spontaneous spirituality of complaint makes perfect sense. On the contrary, God provides the ultimate hope of meaning beyond and then *within* the transitory itself. This encounter with

[33] This sentence of Polkinghorne is stated out of context; it has to depend on a large framework of assumptions. In its bare form here, however, it raises questions for me: the meaning of "kenotic" to be discussed further on; the meaning of "special" providence (I read all providence as special; there is no other kind); and the idea of "cause among causes" (does this mean that God assumes the role of a finite cause?).

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God in suffering grounds the absolute value of those who suffer and makes their lives real and not simply evanescent. That is what God does, and only God can do it. God's presence is not alongside; it encompasses.

The self-limitation of God. I feel I have to defend the idea that the "self-limitation" of God does not make sense against the background of the five theological conceptions of God that I proposed (pure act, ground of being, absolute incomprehensible mystery, spontaneous creativity, and presence). I do this while accepting much of the phenomenology of the experience of God as creator offered by Schaab, with the exception of the anthropomorphic argument that God is like a person. She captures my view exactly when she writes that "conceiving Presence in evolution as pure being, energy, and act may not lend itself to ascribing self-limitation." But perhaps more importantly, I do not see how it makes sense to oppose God and creation, God and human existence, in a dualist zero-sum relationship. If God has to self-limit to make way for creation, suddenly creator and creature are on the same plane. This is a pervasive structural error in the tradition, usually expressed in terms of grace and freedom in competition.

In response to that, I capitalize on the theology of creation to place God immanent in, not external to or in competition with, created reality. The term "panentheism" may have been scarce, but the word defines the substance of the argument of the book. God encompasses the whole and each part of creation itself. God is not shrunk, contracted, minimized, or self-limited by creating; we might even say that God's infinity is expanded by creating in the love that is conceived as the archetype of self-transcending *agape*. Two theological axioms capture this single intuition into the comprehensive meaning of God's transcendent immanence: one is that we grow in autonomy by closer dependence on God; the other is Irenaeus's, that God's glory, not God's self-limitation, is human flourishing. That is why we must fight for it.

Here is another judgment call: Is it more important to so wish for an identifiable action of God within history that makes God stand out over against the world, history, and my life, or to so conceive God that God constitutes the very "within" of the world's narrative? In the latter, God's activity as perspectively distinct from God's personal presence may seem more ambiguous and less able to be isolated by a "here" or a "there." But God's presence is not thereby diminished; it may even be strengthened by the intimacy to which the mystics testify and which can be found in our lives in and of the world. I am pleased that the panel seems to be at home in a grace-filled naturalism that is the center of gravity of this book.

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