

Book reviews

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Kevin W. Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), pp. x + 301. \$29.99/£16.99 (pbk).

Theology means ‘God talk’, but much contemporary theology is troubled by the question of whether such talk is even possible. Talking about God is inherently idolatrous, the argument goes, since applying our concepts to God invariably cuts God down to the size of our concepts. Still worse, because those who occupy positions of power in the church and academy tend to decide which concepts are applied, this idolatry often has the additional effect of re-enforcing wider patterns of social marginalisation which exclude the voices of women, the poor and racial and ethnic minorities. Small wonder that many contemporary theologians feel that love of God and neighbour means embracing a theological apophaticism which rejects the very possibility of talk about God.

In *Theology without Metaphysics* Kevin Hector takes a different tack. He shares with contemporary advocates of apophaticism, like Jean-Luc Marion and John Caputo, a deep suspicion of metaphysics, understood as the equation of reality with our ideas about it. But while he agrees that metaphysics, so understood, does violence both to the transcendence of God and to people who do not conform to established images of divinity, he denies that this violence is so integral to language that it can be avoided only by giving up on language itself. In order to wean us from the belief that we must choose between the presumptions of metaphysics on the one hand, and the denial that our words and ideas connect us with reality on the other, he offers what he calls a therapeutic approach to God-talk: presenting an alternative picture of how words work in which language is not an instrument of metaphysical violence. The result is one of the best books of philosophical theology in the last decade.

Developed with clarity and precision in successive chapters on concepts, meaning, reference and truth, Hector’s alternative picture takes shape as a programme of linguistic de-mystification. For Hector, metaphysics rests on a picture of words as static, self-contained tokens with properties which somehow establish a connection between our minds and the world. Following the lead of the later Wittgenstein, he argues that the properties of words are not fixed and timeless, but rather the ever-evolving precipitate of normative social practices. This perspective allows him to understand

successful communication in pragmatic terms, as the outcome of contestable judgements of appropriate use within particular communities of discourse, rather than as the product of some mysterious correspondence between words and reality. If I wish to speak, so as to be understood by others, I must try to apply my words in line with established patterns of use. In so doing, I hold myself accountable to those precedents, but I also put forward my own application as a proposed precedent for future use as part of what amounts to a process of ongoing, public negotiation of meaning. Because the proper range of application for any word is a function of mutual recognition among the speakers of a language, it is inherently unpredictable, not fixed for all time: a product of mutual accountability rather than of metaphysical violence.

In transferring this general picture of language use to a specifically theological context, Hector draws especially on the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was himself responding to a form of apophaticism in the critical idealism of Immanuel Kant. Hector interprets Schleiermacher's category of 'feeling' (*Gefühl*) as a socially mediated alternative to the purely arbitrary (and thus inherently violent) application of concepts to God: one recognises a particular manifestation of feeling in speech or action as appropriately Christian by comparison with past practice – but each manifestation itself contributes to this history of precedents in a way which affects future judgements. Theology is that aspect of Christian practice which brings these judgements to conscious reflection in doctrinal statements, but insofar as doctrines are themselves attempts to articulate a properly Christian disposition, they, too, are matters of continual negotiation within the community of faith. This process of negotiation originates with Christ, whose own patterns of speech and action, picked up and passed on by his disciples, are the basis for ongoing judgements about what constitutes properly Christian practice. As the one who guides Christians in the practice of mutual recognition down through the centuries, Christ's Spirit is the source of continuity but – given the inherently flexible and open-ended character of doctrinal debate – not of uniformity in the church.

Hector's discussion of metaphor provides a particularly compelling illustration of this process. Again, beginning with everyday language use, he proposes that metaphor be seen as an attempt to carry on an established semantic trajectory in a novel context, so that judgements of appropriate use will be based to some degree on conformity with preceding application of a term, but in the nature of the case cannot be predicted in advance and thus remain open to innovation. He argues that Christian use of language for God follows the same pattern: when successful, application of particular terms to God follows a preceding trajectory of use, but also affects the term's future trajectory. Indeed, because the transcendent divine referent cannot be

pinned down, and the success of any instance of theological predication is ultimately a matter of grace, the suitability of any term for God is always subject to reassessment.

In line with this basic pattern, Hector argues that words are not (as apophatic critics of metaphysics assume) vain – and thus inherently violent – attempts to bridge an ontological chasm between our minds and the world, but rather precipitates of social practice which reflect commitment to a particular trajectory of use. Successful talk, therefore, does not depend on achieving some ideal correspondence between words on the one side, and reality on the other, as though concepts stood between us and the world. Instead, they are themselves features of the world which provide a means of enhancing encounter with reality by serving as an occasion for connecting one's own habits of perception and speech with those of others. Translated to the realm of theology, this means that the theologian's responsibility to God is inseparable from her responsibility to other people, since the appropriateness of any theological claim is mediated socially, as Christ's Spirit leads persons to recognise (or fail to recognise) particular instances of God talk as faithful to the trajectory established by Christ.

While conceding that the church all too often resists the Spirit and so fails to model practices of patient negotiation and shared accountability, Hector nevertheless holds that his picture, in which future word use can never be predicted on the basis of past precedents, provides a viable means of encouraging plurality of voices in the theological conversation. In situations where the force of precedent leads to a systemic failure to recognise certain classes of speakers, he suggests (drawing on the work of Axel Honneth) that individual experiences of non-recognition (or 'disrespect') reveal fissures in the discursive order which provide a basis for the critique and change of established practices. Indeed (and in line with his broader argument), Hector notes that such instances of critique themselves mark out particular linguistic trajectories which can, in turn, provide the basis for further interventions. And here, too, Hector identifies the Spirit, as the agent who inspires people to new forms of God talk which in their inherent unpredictability bear witness to the inexhaustible richness of divinity.

As Hector himself acknowledges, *Theology without Metaphysics* can be seen in certain respects as a development of Bruce Marshall's critique of epistemological foundationalism in *Trinity and Truth*. Like Marshall, Hector is both deeply trinitarian and strongly informed by contemporary analytical philosophy (especially Donald Davidson's 'Principle of Charity'). Where Hector charts his own path is in his use of Schleiermacher (the only figure whose index entry is longer than Davidson's) as a means of providing a closer parallel than Marshall seems to allow between everyday language use

and specifically theological speech. At one point, characterising his project as a 'broadly Schleiermachiian-pragmatist account' (p. 275), Hector rejects the caricature of Schleiermacher as reducing theology to anthropology and, instead, shows how Schleiermacher's account of religious language provides a way of overcoming the sterile opposition between divine revelation and human practice which has bedevilled academic theology for much of the last century. By providing a model of how God can operate through intentional social practices, while remaining ever beyond human control, Hector gives a persuasive account of how the theologian's accountability to God and neighbour can stand in a direct rather than inverse relation to each other. The result may not be the only way to do theology without metaphysics, but its combined commitment to doctrinal integrity and liberative practice makes it a compelling option.

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Kelly Van Andel, Kenneth P. Minkema and Adriaan C. Neele (eds), *Jonathan Edwards and Scotland* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2011), pp. 202. \$120.00 (hbk).

In an insightful 1987 article titled, 'Jonathan Edwards and his Scottish Connections', Harold Simonson remarked, 'Not generally recognized is the extent to which Edwards's connections in Scotland reveal patterns of revivalism and theological debate that took place on the both sides of the Atlantic' (*Journal of American Studies* 21/3 (Dec. 1987), pp. 353–76). The collection of eleven essays contained in *Jonathan Edwards and Scotland* is an important step towards those connections being realised.

As contributions to the 2009 conference 'Jonathan Edwards and Scotland', hosted by the University of Glasgow (in concert with the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University), the eleven essays which now comprise this volume cover a broad range of topics from theology, history and philosophy, to revivalism, missions and literature. Following a brief editors' introduction the essays are divided up into five sections. The first section on 'International Networks' includes Wilson Kimmach on Edwards' interaction and relationship with Scottish clergy and Adriaan C. Neele on the American and Scottish reception of Peter van Mastricht's influential work, *Theoretico-Practica Theologia*. The second part, 'Evangelicalism and Revivalism', contains essays from David Ceri Jones on the influence of Edwards' *Religious Affections* amongst Welsh Calvinists and Chris Chun on the legacy of Edwards' revivalism amongst Scottish Baptists and Presbyterians. The third section,