

An Overview and Critical Appreciation of Katherine Sonderegger's *Systematic Theology*, volume 1, *The Doctrine of God*

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With this book, Katherine Sonderegger has taken on quite a challenge.¹ By this, I do not mean her embarking upon writing a multivolume systematic theology, although that is certainly no small undertaking and is a project that Anglican theologians have not typically engaged.² I do not mean her beginning with an exploration of God's unity instead of God's triunity, which has in recent decades been a much more common launch point for thinking through the nature and character of the divine. I do not even mean her starting with an examination of God in Godself, *God in se*. This is a theological practice of long standing and one that is still commonly followed by some textbooks that introduce systematic theology to contemporary students. As Sonderegger herself points out, however, our confidence in saying anything too specific about God as God is, rather than as God appears to be to our limited and finite minds, has come under an increasingly intense suspicion among theologians. She believes that this has hobbled, where it has not outright silenced via a misplaced apophasis, quite legitimate God-talk in an appropriately kataphatic register.

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¹ Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2015). References to specific pages of this book will be made parenthetically in the text.

² This could possibly be changing, however. Just when it seemed that the less-than-systematic proclivities of our postmodern era might have extinguished the smoldering wick of the multivolume systematic theology, at least for the foreseeable future, three prominent Anglicans have decided to write one. In addition to Sonderegger, both Sarah Coakley (*God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013]) and Graham Ward (*How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2016]) have published the first volumes of their respective systematic theologies, as well.

While these are all significant challenges in themselves, the real challenge she sets for herself is in opening a systematic theology with a focus on the unity of God, as God is *in se*, by paying fresh attention to what are commonly referred to as the “divine perfections,” which include not only God’s unity, but also God’s omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience, traditional and ancient divine attributes that are largely reliant upon a substance metaphysics. All of this—the perfections themselves and the metaphysical framework that supports them—has, for various reasons and to various extents, largely been simply ignored or totally discredited across a large and influential swath of Christian theology. Sonderegger, bucking this trend, sets for herself the challenge of presenting a doctrinal account of who and—shockingly, to some—*what* God is by retrieving and rehabilitating the divine perfections. This is no small task. It is tremendously ambitious. And, in its way, it is not a little audacious.

Calmly, soberly, and confidently, in a manner that somewhat belies its daring, Sonderegger takes the reader through her argument, which is elegantly supported by the overall structure of the volume. She begins in part one with a scriptural-philosophical case for the utterly unique unity of God, the irreducible oneness of God that is so radically beyond all categories that it cannot even be considered to be the sole member of a set or species of oneness that we might imagine or describe. She then demonstrates the ways in which God’s unity provides the basis for each of the other perfections. Those remaining perfections—omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience—are treated in turn and at length in parts two through four, where they are engaged in the context of scriptural exegesis delivered through an unabashed, but not uncritical, Platonism that at once affirms these traditional predicates and recasts them. Omnipresence is God’s invisible visibility, omnipotence is God’s immutable mutability, and omniscience is God’s truthless truth. In complex and ingenious ways, her engagement is theologically provocative and spiritually generative, though space prohibits describing it in detail here. Part five concludes the book with a treatment of divine love as the “keystone” (p. 469) and summation of all the perfections, and with a fascinating argument for the manner in which attending carefully to the divine perfections drives what she takes to be a particularly fruitful strategy for reading scripture both faithfully and doctrinally.

Sonderegger’s theological perspective hinges on two important concepts and is expressed according to a clear and clearly articulated

theological method. The two concepts are her ideas of *theological compatibilism* and *transcendental relation*. Given that Sonderegger states repeatedly that all of theology is rooted in and is in some ways simply an exposition of the implications of the doctrine of the One God, and that she presents this doctrine with constant reference to theological compatibilism and transcendental relation, it seems reasonable to suppose these concepts will animate the subsequent volumes of her systematics as they do this one. It is important, therefore, in understanding Sonderegger's project and the particular contribution it makes to the field of theology, to have a firm grasp of what she means by these terms, as well as to perceive clearly the method according to which Sonderegger uses these concepts to produce a coherent systematic theological treatment of Christian doctrine as a whole.

Theological compatibilism is the name she gives to her view of the God-world relationship. With characteristic Sondereggerian exactness, evocativeness, and efficiency, she summarizes the idea this way: "Deity is not repugnant to the cosmos, nor paradoxical to it. We do not find a *contradiction* or opposition between the One Lord and all that He has made. Rather, the Divine Reality is *compatible* with the cosmos: God has a 'positive' relation to the world" (p. xix). While Sonderegger is quite traditional here (as she is in very many ways throughout this volume) in affirming the transcendence of God to God's creation, she is carefully guarding against and criticizing constructions of the God-world relationship that pit the transcendent God over and against what God has made. She is also rejecting versions of God that situate God in an overly immanent relationship with creation, those that claim that such a relationship is inherent or necessary to God, as in certain forms of process theology, for example. God is simultaneously transcendent to and immanent within creation, a relationship between God and what God has brought into existence that is not a paradox, as some theologies would suggest, but that is a mystery. It is a mystery that does not rely upon any supposed capacity of the finite to bear the infinite or any sort of likeness between creator and creation, but upon the truth revealed in scripture that the God who is thoroughly incommensurate with creation opts to become compatible with creation.

Theological compatibilism, which Sonderegger claims is both a metaphysics and an epistemology, demonstrates that "God's very Reality—His Aseity—resides among us, without contradiction or

identity [between God and creation] or annihilation [of creation by God's presence within it]" (p. 83). Sonderegger maintains—again, swimming against the current of much contemporary theology—that this can be known from the doctrine of God's unity alone, prior to trinitarian or christological elaborations. Moreover, it is knowable because God desires for it to be known. Sonderegger argues that it is not correct to conceptualize God's aseity as a Kantian noumenal reality, something impossible to know in itself but only as it is revealed as phenomenal to finite senses and minds. Quite the opposite: in a manner that Sonderegger herself suggests might be a recuperation of natural theology, one purified of the features that Barth denounced so vehemently, theological compatibilism claims that creation itself is the self-communication of the aseity of God. She is careful to note that explanations of how this is the case are not forthcoming. Our role as theologians is not to explain God but to focus on the fact that God's disclosure of Godself has been made in this way and to "lay out how we might interpret, receive, and praise just this mighty deed" (p. 127). Sonderegger's profound explorations of the divine perfections in this volume are the result of her following her own advice.

The second key concept she employs to carry the project forward is transcendental relation. Theological compatibilism maintains that creator and cosmos are not opposed but rather that God makes the two compatible. The transcendental relation conceptualizes the form and effect of this compatibility. The God who is compatible with creation imbues that creation with the divine perfections precisely by being present to and within it. This is what Sonderegger calls the transcendental relation, the movement of the creator by which "the One God . . . descend[s] from the realm of lights down into the world of things and thought, . . . sustain[ing] it, mingl[ing] with it, and giv[ing] the Life and Love of heavenly fire that is Divine Goodness itself" (p. xx). Calling it "my restatement and reworking of the Thomistic doctrine of God as universal or equivocal cause" (p. 343), the transcendental relation describes Sonderegger's perspective on how the good that God "just is" gives rise to creation's concrete goods.

"In a Transcendental Relation," Sonderegger writes, "the One Being of God is communicated to and exemplified in the finite being and predicates of creatures, yet the One remains lofty and beyond, incommunicable" (p. 451). In her estimation, this dynamic is exemplified particularly well by God's omniscience. Sonderegger does not

understand God to *possess* the divine perfections but to *be* the divine perfections. With respect to God's omniscience, she argues that this does not pertain to God's knowledge, as if we were to conceive of God as some sort of transcendent mind or limitless supercomputer holding an infinite amount of data. God's omniscience refers to the fact that God is, in Godself, truth in the eminent sense. Given theological compatibilism, that God is truth means, according to the corresponding transcendental relation, that the truth that God is illumines all concrete truths in the created order, without itself being characterized by any of them. The truth that God is has no content, has no proper truths, is therefore what I called above a truthless truth. Discrete truths are proper to God's creation, in which the truth that is God is obliquely displayed. Further, these truths do not "participate" in the truth that God is in the manner that Neoplatonism (or, for that matter, Radical Orthodoxy, Sonderegger maintains) claims it does. Rather, they are true because, given the transcendental relation, God who is truth descends into or toward them in such a way that they are true precisely because God elects to disclose Godself in this specific way. While such a claim appears to take on the trappings of philosophy to make its case, Sonderegger observes that in reality this is merely scriptural, that "this is the kenotic descent of the Lord to His own, the Humility of the omniscient, omnipotent God" (p. 452). Scripture provides the witness to the one, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient God. Through scripture, we are able to glimpse the compatibilism of creator and creation, as well as the transcendental relations through which the perfections of God, which God does not possess but rather embodies, can be recognized as such in our creaturely reality.

These two concepts or, better, controlling theological commitments are the basis for the entire systematic project that Sonderegger has inaugurated and they drive her theological method. To a large extent they *are* her theological method. In Sonderegger's estimation, articulating doctrine is first a descriptive endeavor and then a reflective one. Properly speaking, doctrine can only be a statement of what God has given us to know about Godself through divine self-disclosure. There are definite limits to that revelation. God communicates the divine perfections to allow creatures to perceive their creator and because the God who is love desires for creation to be graced with these goods. We creatures do not, however, come to plumb the depths of the mystery who is God. We are only able to name that

mystery, reflect upon it, and, in a disciplined and restrained manner, elaborate its “impictures” (p. 80).

As Sonderegger puts it, “God just is His own relation to the world. We cannot explain this, nor subsume it into another category and class, nor defend it using earthly tools. We *receive* it in wonder; we praise it; we turn aside to see this great thing the Lord God has done. Theological compatibilism describes and reports what it has seen; nothing more” (p. 79). The proper role of such a report, she observes, is to inflame praise of and prayer to God. Theology, therefore, ought to have a decidedly doxological cast (hence Sonderegger’s frequent near-rhapsodic arias of praise and her liberal use of honorific capitals when referring to the Divine Things of God). Prayer is the existential posture of referring everything back to God, of interceding for the world before God, of praising God for the gift of God’s own goodness, truth, presence, and love in the creation and maintenance of all that God has made.

Among the challenges that Sonderegger has set for herself in proceeding in the manner she has, cutting against the grain of a good deal of contemporary academic theology, one that looms particularly large is her decision to retain masculine pronouns for the divine. An end-note to the preface acknowledges she has done this and categorically states that her having done so “is *not* a repudiation of feminist theology or its sophisticated analysis of creaturely language for God,” but reflects a commitment to retain personal terms for the divine, “both He and She” (p. xxiii2). In the place where she points to a use of “she” to refer to God, however, that appears to be limited to references to God’s wisdom (presumably warranted by the feminine figure of divine wisdom in Proverbs, though that is not made explicit) or to the whole of God to the extent that this is the God who “took Mary’s flesh for His own” (p. 385), without appearing to notice the irony of that formulation. Otherwise, God is referred to only with masculine pronouns. Of course, Sonderegger is aware that God is beyond creaturely, biological gender. But her commitment to theological compatibilism takes seriously the modes in which God has been known through creaturely bodies, the sexed reality of those bodies, and the masculine form—scriptural and fleshly—they have taken. For this reason, Sonderegger observes that, when she arrives at her treatment of the doctrine of faith, there will be a place to provide “a full treatment of the feminist *knowledge* of God,” that is, an exploration of how men and women might come to know God differently, but that “the road to a proper

feminist *doctrine* of God is steep" (p. 384). In a volume of more than five hundred pages, that Sonderegger has elected to devote only a scant few of them to what many consider to be the urgent issue of sexing the divine, and this while choosing to retain masculine pronouns for God, might strike some as profoundly perplexing.

Given that this is the first in a multivolume argument, it is unlikely the matter of sexed language for God will be the only issue that remains open for readers after making their way through this book. Some may likewise not be convinced by Sonderegger's willingness to retain the standard Greek philosophical concepts and metaphysical frameworks employed by traditional theologians for two thousand years but in which (post)modernity has lost confidence. Others may not be fully persuaded that Sonderegger is right to be so sanguine about the possibility of knowing as much about God *in se* as her work claims. Still others might be hesitant to accept her repeated critiques of narrative approaches to biblical interpretation or attending overly closely to the humanity of Jesus in formulating their Christologies. Fortunately, she still has several volumes at her disposal to make her cases, clarify her arguments, and—what is equally crucial—indicate more concretely not only the spiritual difference the perspective she has started to offer makes to the Christian person, but the lived difference it makes in the practice of Christian discipleship.

What we have from Katherine Sonderegger so far in this poetic, provocative, and profound first volume suggests all of that and much more is in the offing. This book presents a wise and traditional, yet quietly radical, vision, offered by a theologian who is distilling the profound insight that a career of scholarship and prayer has afforded her, a perspective we should anticipate unfolding beautifully and audaciously over the coming years.