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Some Comments on Moral Realism and Scriptural Authority¹

Donald Wood

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article considère deux thèmes de la troisième et dernière partie de l'ouvrage de Brock : sa défense d'une forme particulière de réalisme moral et sa vision de l'interprétation biblique comme d'un art.

On parle ici de réalisme pour signaler cette idée que la responsabilité morale humaine est principalement de répondre plutôt que de simplement construire : nous ne créons pas notre situation morale à neuf, mais nous la percevons ou la découvrons en portant continuellement notre attention sur les moments concrets de l'histoire de l'œuvre créatrice de Dieu qui est en cours. Brock décrit les processus par lesquels nous entrons en harmonie avec cette activité divine et fait ainsi un usage suggestif des textes bibliques, en particulier des Psaumes. Cette approche immédiate de l'Écriture s'accompagne de la volonté d'éviter les affirmations hautement métaphysiques concernant Dieu et le monde. Ceci soulève la question suivante : le développement d'une sensibilité dans la prière aux particularités exégétiques et situationnelles des textes conduisent-elles nécessairement à des préoccupations de métaphysique théologique ? Autrement dit, prêter son attention aux doctrines chrétiennes classi-

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on two aspects of the argument developed in the third and concluding part of *Singing the Ethos of God*: its commitment to a particular form of moral realism and its understanding of scriptural interpretation as a 'craft'.

To speak of the 'realism' of *Singing* is to draw attention to its sense that human moral agency primarily is responsive rather than sheerly constructive, its awareness that we do not create our moral situation *de novo* but 'perceive' or 'discover' it by continually attending to concrete moments in the ongoing history of God's creative work. In its depiction of the processes by which we become attuned to this divine activity, Brock makes fresh and suggestive use of scriptural texts, particularly the Psalms. But this (wholly salutary) scriptural immediacy stands alongside a considered avoidance of highly developed meta-

ques dont Brock se préoccupe peu ne pourrait-il pas au contraire aider à caractériser adéquatement les moyens de notre transformation morale ?

Puisque l'Écriture est le principal texte susceptible de produire cette transformation, Brock pense à juste titre que l'argumentation morale chrétienne doit être exégétique. C'est une activité engageant toute la personne et qui ne peut être apprise que par la participation active à la vie d'une communauté interprétative traversant l'histoire, dans une tradition exégétique. Mais cet accent sur l'importance de la prise en compte des particularités de la tradition exégétique chrétienne est tempéré par l'idée que cela devrait se faire de façon exploratoire plutôt qu'en termes positifs. Ceci soulève une autre question : présenter la tradition exégétique chrétienne comme un espace acoustique rend-il justice au rôle spécifique joué historiquement par les confessions de foi par rapport aux textes prophétiques et apostoliques de l'Écriture ? Brock a-t-il prêté suffisamment attention à l'exercice et à la communication de l'autorité au sein de la tradition ? On pourrait prolonger cette réflexion en s'interrogeant sur la christologie de son livre, qui parle relativement peu de l'ascension et de l'office royal de Christ.

physical claims about God and the world. And the first question raised by this reading of *Singing* is whether the development of prayerful sensitivity to exegetical and situational particulars necessarily entails a cultivated worry about the development of a theological metaphysics. Put otherwise, the question is whether renewed attention to some tracts of classical Christian teaching not well represented in *Singing* – talk of the free grounds of God's economic activity in his eternal triune life, for example – would not so much displace nuanced discussion of the means of our moral transformation as help properly to characterise it.

Brock rightly argues that Scripture's role as the primary textual means of this transformation means that Christian moral reasoning fundamentally is exegetical reasoning. This is a wholly self-involving activity that can be learned only by active participation in a historically extended interpretative community – i.e., in an exegetical tradition.

But this (again, wholly salutary) emphasis on the need to attend to the particularities of the Christian exegetical tradition stands alongside a strong sense that it should be understood in explorative rather than positive terms. And the second question put to the book is whether – whatever we might say of the dynamics of learning a traditional ‘craft’ elsewhere – talk of the Christian exegetical tradition as an ‘acoustic space’ adequately attends to the

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel reflektiert über zwei Aspekte der These, die im dritten und abschließenden Teil von *Singing the Ethos of God* entwickelt wird: die Bindung des Buches an eine bestimmte Form des moralischen Realismus und sein Verständnis von Schriftinterpretation als einem „Handwerk“.

Vom „Realismus“ des Buches *Singing the Ethos of God* zu sprechen heißt, die Aufmerksamkeit auf die Haltung des Buches zu lenken, dass die menschliche moralische Handlungskompetenz in erster Linie eine reagierende ist, im Gegensatz zu einer rein konstruktiven; heißt also, die Aufmerksamkeit auf das Bewusstsein des Buches zu lenken, dass wir unsere moralische Situation nicht *de novo* erzeugen, sondern dass wir sie „wahrnehmen“ oder „entdecken“, indem wir uns beständig mit konkreten Momenten in der laufenden Geschichte des kreativen Werkes Gottes befassen. In der Beschreibung der Prozesse, durch die wir auf diese göttliche Aktivität eingestimmt werden, benutzt Brock Texte der Schrift auf frische und anregende Weise, besonders Psalmtexte. Aber diese (völlig heilsame) Unmittelbarkeit zur Schrift steht neben einer wohl überlegten Vermeidung von hochentwickelten metaphysischen Behauptungen über Gott und die Welt. Und die erste Frage, die diese Leseweise des Buches *Singing the Ethos of God* aufwirft, lautet, ob die vom Gebet getragene Sensibilität für exegetische und situative Besonderheiten notwendigerweise eine gepflegte Angst vor der Entwicklung einer theologischen Metaphysik beinhaltet. Anders ausgedrückt: Es ist die Frage, ob erneute Aufmerksamkeit gegenüber einigen Bereichen der klassischen christlichen Lehre, die

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‘Everything’, the English Christian author Chesterton once wrote, ‘has in fact another side to it.’²² His point was not the relativist’s platitude that things always can be seen and said otherwise; he was, rather, expressing a conviction, deep-seated in his thought, that we can be *surprised* by the world, and that – if we see the world rightly – we continually should be. It befits us as human beings to be astonished that things are as they are. And it is our singular duty to reflect on the ways in which we habitually lose touch with the world precisely by

specific roles historically played by creeds and confessions vis-à-vis the prophetic-apostolic scriptural texts. In short, does Brock say enough about the exercise and so the communication of authority within the tradition? A fuller treatment of this question invites reflection on the Christology of his book, which speaks relatively little of the ascension of Christ and of his royal office.

in *Singing the Ethos of God* nicht gut vertreten sind – z. B. die Rede von den Ursachen der heilsgeschichtlichen Aktivität Gottes in seinem ewigen dreieinigen Leben -, die nuancierte Diskussion der Mittel unserer moralischen Transformation weniger verdrängen als vielmehr dieselben angemessen zu charakterisieren helfen würde.

Brock argumentiert zu Recht, dass die Rolle der Schrift als primärem textlichen Mittel dieser Transformation bedeutet, dass christliches moralisches Argumentieren grundlegend exegetisches Argumentieren ist. Das ist eine Aktivität, die jemanden völlig einbezieht und die nur durch aktive Teilnahme an einer historisch gewachsenen interpretativen Gemeinschaft gelernt werden kann – also in einer exegetischen Tradition. Aber diese (wiederum völlig heilsame) Betonung der Notwendigkeit, sich mit den Besonderheiten der christlichen exegetischen Tradition zu befassen, steht neben einem starken Eindruck, dass die Tradition forschend, nicht positiv verstanden werden sollte. Und die zweite Frage, die an das Buch gestellt wird, lautet, ob die Rede von der christlichen exegetischen Tradition als einem „akustischen Raum“ die spezifischen Rollen angemessen beachtet, die historisch von Glaubensbekenntnissen im Gegenüber zu den prophetisch-apostolischen Texten gespielt wurden – unabhängig davon, was wir zu den Dynamiken des Erlernens eines traditionellen „Handwerks“ andernorts sagen könnten. Kurzum: Sagt Brock genug zur Ausübung und damit zur Kommunikation von Autorität innerhalb der Tradition? Eine ausführlichere Auseinandersetzung mit dieser Frage lädt zu Überlegungen über die Christologie dieses Buches ein, die relativ wenig von der Himmelfahrt Christi und seinem königlichen Amt spricht.

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taking it for granted. ‘So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and reasonably created for a giraffe to eat, we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular that we take off our hats, to the astonishment of the park-keeper.’²³

This basic insight into the moral primacy of perception can be elaborated in terms, at once more formal and more personal, that bring us close to the heart of the vision of the Christian life and of

Christian ethics that animates the third, final part of Brian Brock's *Singing the Ethos of God*.⁴ To act well in the world, we might say, I must perceive the world as it truly is. And habitually, to my shame and sorrow, I fail to do so. In other words, the decisive ethical question – 'Where am I?' – is always bound up with another – 'How do I become one who perceives my situation rightly?' Christian moral theology names the attempt to put these questions to God by putting them to Scripture. And it remains in this life always unfinished business: we never are done enquiring after God, never done prayerfully regarding his Word. But this is not to say our prayer goes unanswered; indeed, it is itself already always an answer – a response in faith to the divine address that calls us into being and from which alone we can live: 'We are created by the Word of God, our human life is the answer to his Word'.⁵

This response to the divine address in the form of a prayerful scriptural exploration of our moral situation is not a solitary, purely intellectual exercise. It takes shape in communities of resounding praise: Christians read Scripture ethically when they sing together. And if this is an act in which some lead and others follow (if exegetical and moral judgments take shape in a tradition), it is still a task given to every Christian. So the question finally is not how to speak of the relationship between 'Scripture' and 'ethics' as an academic concern calling for a methodological response; the question is how to find ourselves in Scripture, and so learn gladly to inhabit the new world of God's working into which Scripture leads us.

So far, a rough preliminary sketch of the matter. The task before us is to reflect on this account of the relationship of Scripture and Christian ethics more fully and carefully, and to put some doctrinal questions to it. To anticipate: I think Brock is importantly right in his twofold claim that the proper perception of moral space is ethically basic and that Christians learn to know their situation – insofar as they do – by reading Scripture well. Scriptural reading, we might say, is internal to moral reasoning, and vice versa. For, on the one hand, learning to read Scripture Christianly – to read this biblical passage in this way and not that – involves learning to perceive my situation as one that calls for me to act in just this way rather than in any other. And, conversely, appropriately discerning my location always is a matter of attending to Scripture's specific instruction – you are *here*, so you must and may act *thus*. In words drawn directly from *Singing*: 'willingness and facility in venturing exegeti-

cal judgments is a precise correlative of willingness and facility in making individual ethical judgments in real time' (259).

But I also think we would do well to raise some questions both about how Brock construes our moral situation and about the way in which he depicts the role of Scripture in shaping our vision of reality. More closely, we need to consider at least these two interlocking questions: 1) In its commitment to a directly exegetical mode of contextual description, is *Singing* unduly anxious about doctrinal summary and metaphysical restatement of the scriptural texts, and does it thereby fail to attend to some tracts of traditional doctrine that retain important exegetical and moral force? 2) In its account of scriptural reading as a craft learned in an irreducibly complex and wholly specific exegetical tradition, does the book say enough about the concrete ways in which Scripture exerts and communicates its moral authority?

In restricting ourselves to these lines of reflection, we will of course pass by much of interest. *Singing* is an exceptionally stimulating book and it rewards reading from multiple angles. In our consideration of its final section, two defects in particular need to be noted. First, I have said very little by way of comment on the decisive intellectual influences on *Singing*, though echoes of these voices will be heard clearly enough. Second, and more culpably, I have chosen not to engage at length the scriptural exegesis that forms the constructive heart of the book. A reading of this material informs the entire presentation here, and it occasionally emerges into clear view. But it does not take centre stage, and so I have not taken up directly the difficult and fruitful question of what it might teach us of the practice of ethical exegesis. In these omissions as in its positive explication, what follows should be read as an extended gloss on the *tolle, lege* ('take and read') – a recommendation that readers return to the book for themselves, precisely in order to be directed once again with renewed attention and love to the scriptural texts it so admirably serves.

I.

For all the complexity and nuance of *Singing*, the broad outlines of its argument can be traced in fairly straightforward terms. Simply put, the book takes up the familiar question: what is the place of Scripture in Christian ethics?; sets it alongside another: what is the place of Christian ethics in Scripture?; and suggests that this second ques-

tion, rightly understood, comprehends in itself the proper answer to the first. This threefold movement corresponds, roughly, to the three main parts of the book. So in the five chapters that constitute Part I, Brock develops a typology of recent, (mostly) English-language, accounts of the role of the Bible in Christian ethics (the chapter on Bonhoeffer is exceptional in several senses). Part II offers a reading of Augustine and Luther on the Psalms, introducing readers to an older tradition that presumes the truth and relevance of Scripture's moral landscape, and which understands continually renewed engagement with the scriptural texts as a divinely appointed means by which we may learn rightly to praise the Creator and so gladly to inhabit our rightful place in his world. Part III recapitulates this movement from hermeneutics to exegesis in a constructive mode: chapter 8 sketches a vision of scriptural interpretation as a never-ending exploration of the divine ethos, a transformative process of 'discovering our way into life with God' (244) and chapter 9 exhibits the theological richness of the craft of ethical exegesis through its extended and creative readings of Psalms 130 and 104.

The overarching concern of the book is to ask after the role of Scripture, and especially the Psalms, in our moral transformation. In summary form: the subject of this transformation is the triune God, its textual instrument is Scripture, 'God's chosen form of self-mediation' (249), and its end is perfected creaturely fellowship – a human community that lives in the unity of the Creator's praise. The ultimate *telos* of this divine working lies beyond the boundaries of history in the *visio Dei* (362); but about the eschatological transcendence of Scripture's mediatorial role Brock has little directly to say. The book rather focuses all its efforts on describing and exhibiting the ways in which Scripture functions in the divine economy to generate 'a community that has its own ethos, distinct and distinctly Christian' (281).

In its depiction of this transformation of human life, the book regularly deploys two complementary sets of images: transformation as a *movement into a new culture* and as a *movement into wholeness*. The role of Scripture is construed somewhat differently in each connection.

Consider first the image of the Christian life as a process of cultural discovery or exploration. The recurring example is of a person who undertakes a journey to a foreign country:

She wants to stay for a long time and desires

to know the culture, to fit in as best she can, to become a participant in the flow of life and thus to learn from the inside what the culture has to teach. The first hurdle she faces is learning the language, and in the process [of learning it] she slowly discovers that she is learning not merely a language but a new way of life (244).

Three things are worth noting. First, the image of the Christian life as cultural discovery bespeaks a commitment to some form of *moral realism*. The relevant verbs make the point clearly enough: desiring, fitting in, becoming a participant, learning, facing a hurdle, discovering. The Christian life is not an exercise in self-invention; Christian identity is 'external constituted' (70; cf. esp. 300-301), ordered by and towards an antecedent reality. Just so, we must conceive of Christian ethics 'not as "creating" a better world but as the discovery of the world of God's working' (243). Second, the process of learning a new culture is irreducibly *linguistic*: 'we enter cultures by learning their languages' (*ibid*). Conversely, one can only learn a language by immersing oneself in the forms of life that ground and sustain it (245). This deep intersection of language and praxis is named 'grammar' and its defining character in any given culture is called 'ethos'. Each is an embracing term: a grammar may comprehend many discourses; an ethos many behaviours. A traveller may fairly quickly learn a new discourse; the exploration of a grammar never ends.⁶ Third, the process of learning a new culture – and so a new grammar or ethos – begins with *desire*. And that is to say a Christian moral theology must always also be a theology of the Christian affections.

At this point we can begin to understand what is meant by the claim that Christian ethics is 'the task of making the grammar of our lives explicit by bringing it into contact with Scripture' (242). Christian ethics has not primarily to do with the modification of Christian behaviours, perhaps by the application of moral precepts culled from the more overtly 'ethical' passages of Scripture. Rather, it is a process of self-discovery enabled by immersion in Scripture's moral world. By exposing ourselves to Scripture's grammar – to the forms of life from which by God's design Scripture proceeds and to which it tends – we come to recognize that 'we are all strangers to the moral world of Scripture' (ix). The task of Christian ethics is not to overcome this estrangement conceptually, but to know and name the ways in which Scripture's

world remains foreign to us, and so to facilitate our movement into it.

Like the anthropologist, the ethicist engages in a descriptive task of exposing contemporary social grammars to view. But unlike anthropology, Christian ethics does so to facilitate their assessment, critique and possible reformulation in the light of the work of Christ. In short, Christian ethics describes and evaluates the grammar of human behaviour as a joyous participation in the transformation of the Christian mind and action (247).

This *Leitmotiv* of foreignness' (xiv; cf. 328) is complemented by another controlling image: that of the Christian life as a movement into wholeness. Whereas before the human condition is conceived as a state of alienation or estrangement,⁷ here it is perceived as fragmented and threatened by dissolution. Correspondingly, God's renewal of human life is understood as its reordering and reintegration. In the most severely formal terms, the problematic is the relation of the one and the many: how is it that we can discern and embrace the unity of our lives in the multiplicity of our experiences and proximate commitments? Conversely, how can we learn truthfully to celebrate the world's abundance, neither seeking to master it nor failing rightly to acknowledge it? And, alongside these questions: how do we discern and describe Scripture's function in God's ordering of this diverse world?

Brock considers and responds to these questions – and herein lies his main provocation – primarily exegetically, by offering extended readings of Psalm 130 and 104. At the risk of slightly over-schematising his book, we might say that the two images of transformation as a movement into a new culture and as a movement into wholeness (or: as the discovery of a new world and as the discovery of the world's manifold unity) map directly onto the themes of these two psalms. So Psalm 130 is read as 'portray[ing] the birth of Christian faith' (242) in prayer and Psalm 104 its growth in praise. By taking up Psalm 130 as our own song, we discover that Scripture introduces us to a radically new world, the world of God's present working, and that prayer is 'the practice in which a new world of faith appears' (282). In prayer, we learn with Israel actively to hope in the advent of God's renewing presence by calling upon his name. The Psalm itself is the enablement of our invocation precisely as the textual reflex of Israel's prayer. From Psalm 104, we learn that the one God continually orders creation

as a harmonious whole, an inwardly differentiated unity which we come to know and to celebrate by taking our own part with all the saints in Israel's praise (cf. 304).

In the course of his reading of these Psalms, Brock occasionally makes passing reference to specific contemporary ethical issues – questions currently arising in environmental and medical ethics, for example – as well as classical moral puzzles (when, if ever, is it permissible to lie?). But the tenor of the book is reflective rather than deliberative; it does not undertake extensive analysis of particular ethical issues so much as ask how scriptural reading provokes reconsideration of the terms in which we undertake to describe the realities that call for moral engagement.⁸ The primary ethical question is, again, contextual: Where are we? And, again, the continual putting of this question to Scripture is itself the primary task of Christian ethics, the recurring original step in our active collaboration in our own transformation (cf. xviii). When Brock puts this question to the Psalms, the basic answer is: we are in God's world, in God's story.

II.

'God does not need the world for his own perfection.'⁹ So Herman Bavinck, representing a broad consensus in the tradition. Against all forms of monism, the creedal tradition insists that reality is ontologically complex. And while this conviction is, finally, grounded in a christological affirmation – in the doctrine of the two natures – it finds clear expression in the doctrine of creation. The terms 'Creator' and 'creature', we can say, are metaphysically basic. And their proper use involves at least three affirmations. First, God and creation are not equivalent realities. They remain in every instance entirely distinct. God is not creation or some instance of it; creation is not God nor some part or aspect of God. Second, God and creation are conjointly exhaustive of reality. There is God and there is the world, and there is nothing else. Third, the relationship between God and the world is neither necessary nor accidental but contingent. God creates out of no inward compulsion or external constraint, he realises no potential in himself or in some external factor, but effortlessly brings his will to pass in a wholly fitting act of sovereign freedom. Just so, creation introduces no essential change in God. And, for its part, creation is free simply to be itself. For the ultimate whence of creation lies

in the utterly gratuitous resolve of the triune God whose eternal greatness and goodness enjoys no increase and suffers no diminution from creation's coming-to-be.¹⁰

In the language taken up in the older Reformed dogmatics, creation is the first of the *operationes Dei externae*, and like all such works it rests on the *operationes internae*. And here a distinction is to be made between the personal inward works of God and his essential works *ad intra* (the manifold decrees of the one eternal divine counsel). These works belong together, but in just this order. First, the Father's eternal knowing and loving the Son, the Son's perfect response to the Father (Matthew 11:27; John 17:24) and the Spirit's eternal searching of the deep things of God (1 Corinthians 2:10).¹¹ Then God's eternal decree to create the world and to keep faith with it. And then, but only then, the works *ad extra* – those creative and redemptive actions which God freely undertakes towards and in the world.¹² To speak thus of the radical non-necessity of creation's existence is not to undermine its genuine reality, and so to corrode the sense that our actions in the world finally matter. It is, rather, to secure the sort of reality which the world and our actions in it possess, an attempt to specify precisely what it means to say we act, if at all, in *creation*. As creatures, we exercise real moral initiative and so we may genuinely respond in freedom to a God who freely has granted us life – not the divine life which is uniquely and incommunicably his, but the life which properly is ours according to his good pleasure.

This, in rough outline, is one traditional way to specify what it means to begin speaking theologically of creation as the place in which human beings may intend and enact the good. For its part, *Singing* clearly knows and straightforwardly registers the scripturally and theologically basic distinction between Creator and creation: 'Creation is not God' (254).¹³ But it remains throughout uninterested in and indeed deeply nervous about the sorts of doctrinal distinctions just invoked. Brock offers us, in short, a deeply non-metaphysical account of the human situation. He knows that to speak of our moral context in scriptural terms is to speak of the world as God's creation, and so to speak of the infrangible distinction between God and the world. But he wishes us to mark this difference not, in the first instance, by deploying a doctrine of the anterior perfection of the divine life, an account of the divine counsel and decrees, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and so on, but by taking up the language

of Israel's prayer and praise as it comes to us in the Psalter.

Could we say that this pervasive resistance to metaphysics in *Singing* trades on a basic sense that talk of enduring natures and accomplished intentions, creaturely or divine, tends to harden our gaze, preventing us from perceiving God's new and unanticipated historically generative acts and so distorting our understanding of the possibilities and responsibilities for action which we encounter along the way? The book is clear, in any case, that '[t]he use and inhabitation of Christian descriptions of reality happens in irreducibly particular circumstances and thus depends not only on a grasp of the systematic connections of the theology but also on having been shaped into a people who know how to ask for and discern the Spirit's appearance' (259). And this statement, appropriately balanced in itself, stands against the backdrop of a whole series of statements that express an overarching worry that modern moral and systematic theologies habitually abstract from the concrete urgencies of the life of faith, tempted to believe that once we have 'mapped' our moral space or developed a mature theological ontology the work essentially is done.

Of course, systematic moral theologies in particular need to be alert to the force of this critique; we have every reason to accept the point that 'over-confidence in the explanatory and orientational power of moral ontology can radically mischaracterise how the Christian faith conceives of life with God in time, and so can resist the judgement, conversion and hope which can arise only in the specific episodes of the economy of God's speech and action towards us'.¹⁴ But we should not be too quickly forced into deciding between scriptural transparency and systematic cogency, between taking direct moral instruction from an intra-textually ramified reading of the Psalter and allowing dogmatically ordered articulations of scriptural teaching to direct us to implications of the gospel to which we might otherwise remain inattentive. And we should not adopt too rigid a posture towards the long, catholic tradition of trinitarian moral theology in which rigorous, carefully modulated metaphysical statement is understood as a natural extension and confirmation of the close, continual, direct engagement with discrete scriptural texts and moments of active moral commitment that is the primary business of the Christian life.

III.

This metaphysically deflationary posture in the account of Scripture's moral world in Brock's book finds important correspondences in its treatment of scriptural interpretation, which takes an active interest in counteracting what it takes to be an intellectually unsatisfying and spiritually troubling investment in hermeneutical method. In transitioning to this aspect of the book's argument, we are, note, not leaving behind the question of how we are to understand its talk of our moral transformation as a movement into the wholeness God intends for his people. The question here simply takes on a different form: granted that Scripture is, precisely in its variegated canonical form, the divinely appointed means by which God embraces, judges and unifies the many discourses of the world into a single grammar, how is this soteriological function to find fitting recognition in our reading practices?

We begin with the simple observation that Scripture is not formless. It is by God's design neither a single, monolithic text nor a conglomerate of texts only incidentally related. It is the unified collection of entirely distinctive writings we call the canon of the Old and New Testaments. And precisely in this form it is the means by which God embraces and heals the various competing discourses of our world. The task of Christian ethics, then, is not to abstract some moral content from Scripture out of a felt duty conceptually to improve upon its given form, but simply 'to expose the Bible's function in the divine reclamation of the diverse rationalities partitioning and fragmenting our lives' (253). More specifically, in reading the Psalms we are led to ask: 'How do we allow the scriptural form and content to shape both our exegetical and ethical methodologies? How do we perceive their inner unity?' (242) Again, the question bespeaks a realist commitment: The moral power of Scripture as an integrated whole, in the unity of its form and content, is a factor of its employment in the divine service, not of our reading practices. Scripture's moral relevance does not depend upon our ability to identify the text's overarching 'subject-matter', for example, or a set of unifying focal images. The search for a hermeneutical 'centre' of Scripture or a master-concept must always prove a failure and a distraction, for Scripture is a grammar, and a grammar has no 'centre' (252).¹⁵ Again, the unity of Scripture is not a characteristic accruing to it *qua* text. Its unity is a function solely of its relation

to 'the unified grammar of the divine life that faith seeks in the diverse moments and strands of the biblical witness and in our lives' (253). Scripture is, we might say, both a formal and a material witness to the manifold wisdom of the one God – a textual reflex and just so a fitting servant of God's work of integrating many voices into a single song of praise.

Thus Scripture can be called an 'acoustic realm' (262). And as with Scripture, so it is – *mutatis mutandis* – with the exegetical tradition. This tradition is to be understood 'not as a repository of settled ontological truths but as a broad, multifaceted, and somehow unified and unbroken wrestling with specific texts' (103) – an acoustic space in which each voice has its own place alongside and in complex interaction with others.

Brock is precisely right, I think, to insist that Scripture needs no improvement, and that theology must continually resist the temptation to translate Scripture's historically complicated and conceptually mobile language wholesale into some more apparently purified, extensible and so generally relevant idiom. Modern accounts of scriptural reading and of Christian ethics have too often traded on abstractions of Scripture's content from its given form (cf. 241). It is at this point that the analysis of contemporary Scripture-and-ethics discussions in *Singing* is most penetrating and forceful, for it is able to diagnose the contemporary commitment to method as a *spiritual* problem – a failure of theological nerve, a lack of confidence in God's decision to rule his Church precisely through these texts, in all their evident diversity and even their apparent disarray.

The point becomes clearer in light of the book's positive proposal that we think of scriptural reading as a 'craft'. Learning to read the Bible well is a far more complex and self-involving process than mastering and deploying a method. 'This kind of biblical interpretation cannot be learned from an instruction manual'; 'it demands apprenticeship to those who can teach us the forms of judging' how rightly to perceive our place in our social and cultural context ('the logic of our lives') and how to perceive our immediate context in Scripture's terms (262). To learn scriptural interpretation as a craft, that is, is to become a different sort of person – to be transformed by our immersion in a long tradition of churchly reading.

Thus active engagement in the church's living exegetical tradition is primary, requiring and allowing no prior justification in terms of some general

hermeneutical theory – even a theory of the irreducibly communal quality of understanding. One simply begins by beginning.¹⁶ If anything precedes the initial act of reading in this tradition it is simply the desire to do so, where desire is the quality of a personal *act*, and so can be described only in biographical terms. (This is, I take it, one of the functions of the reading of Augustine’s hermeneutical conversion in the book’s introduction.) Above all, we cannot think that we can secure our position *vis-à-vis* Scripture and ensure a proper reading of it in advance of our actually engaging it – certainly not by the cultivation and deployment of an exegetical methodology. Scriptural reading always is an act of self-exposure, demanding complete commitment. Better, scriptural reading is an activity that takes shape within the *church*. And if we seek to name its original moment, we simply confess: *credo ecclesiam*. And as scriptural reading takes place as a dynamic in the common life of the saints, so a theology of scriptural interpretation must always be a theology of the third article.

All of this – if it is in fact a tolerably accurate representation of the dynamics Brock seeks to indicate – is much to be welcomed. But again we would do well to ask whether there are not losses as well as gains in the way *Singing* makes its case, and whether attending to the particularities of Scripture and of the exegetical tradition may not take a somewhat different form.

May we not in fact be led to a more comprehensive and ordered vision of the manifold unity of the tradition, for example, if we view it not simply as a space of spiritual exploration or as an ‘inter-generational dialogue of a community of faith as it learns anew what it means to walk with God’ (281) but also and even primarily as the history of the church’s divine service as stewards of the apostolic gospel, the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints?¹⁷ Put more sharply, is it possible to speak not simply of the corrigibility of the creeds (and confessions) but also of their abiding *authority*? Unremitting stress on particularities can have a curiously flattening effect on history. And against an impression that some readers may take from the silences of *Singing*, we need to remind ourselves that the Christian exegetical tradition also is in large measure a creedal and confessional tradition. In doing so, we also need clearly to assert that the intention and effect of appeals to the authority of the creeds and confessions is not simply to close down the church’s interpretative options but also to liberate the church from merely parochial read-

ings of Scripture – including those readings which, undertaken in a post-metaphysical era, no longer even aspire to catholicity. In this sense, active deference to creedal and confessional documents as authorities – secondary, derivative authorities, subject to Scripture’s absolute judgment, but authorities nonetheless – opens up theological discourse rather than closing it down. And so it serves contemporary moral and exegetical reflection in much the same way as appeals to the Scripture principle or the construction of theological systems – both of which are ways in which theology serves the contemporary church by reminding it that its range of sympathies and interests is not self-justifying. We may well continue to allow concerns about premature closure and theological abstraction to inspire doubts about ancient creeds and modern systems of doctrine, but it is never a foregone conclusion that our worries are uniformly well-placed.

A useful contrast may be drawn at this point with the recent essay by Oliver O’Donovan on ‘The Moral Authority of Scripture’.¹⁸ Reflecting on the exclusivity of the *hypo theou* [‘from / by God’] of Romans 13.1, O’Donovan explores the ways in which the authority of the one God meets us through many media. While all authority comes ‘from God’, it does not encounter us *directly* from God, but is mediated to us through created structures. Where this mediation is distorted, creaturely freedom is separated from its true source and end in God, and human agents become enslaved by the world’s ‘rulers and authorities’. To perceive our moral situation, then, is to be instructed by the gospel that Christ has triumphed over these worldly powers and sits enthroned as ‘the sovereign Lord of creaturely authorities, appointed to bring them to their goal in the purposes of God’.¹⁹ Talk of Christian obedience, then, which arises at the intersection of divine authority and creaturely freedom, requires us to speak of the ascension and heavenly session of Christ. And so we are led (Ephesians 1) to speak of Christ’s communication of his kingly authority to the church that is built on the apostles and prophets – which is to say, upon the authors of the New and Old Testaments. Thus the moral authority of Scripture is grounded in a christologically focused account of the economy of salvation. And because all genuine authority is self-communicating, Scripture engenders in the reading church dogmatic statements that themselves enjoy a derivative, limited, but just so proper authority of their own.²⁰

The differences in this construal of the shape

of the divine economy with those in *Singing* is instructive – talk of Christ’s ascension and session, for example, enjoys a low profile in Brock, who speaks more fluently of the relationship between Christ and the church using the Pauline metaphor of the ‘body of Christ’ read through Augustine’s doctrine of the *totus Christus* while making free and somewhat opaque use of the *communicatio idiomatum*. The question is whether, given its own doctrinal commitments, *Singing* can carry through its analysis of the relationship between Scripture and Christian ethics towards a fuller account of authority in the tradition. Only so, perhaps, can we speak of scriptural interpretation as a ‘craft’ learned by immersion in the exegetical tradition and mean the tradition of Augustine and Luther.

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Notes

- 1 This is an edited version of a paper presented at the Annual Book Colloquium of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE), Tyndale House, Cambridge, 3-4 September 2008.
- 2 G.K. Chesterton, ‘A Defence of Nonsense’, in *Stories, Essays and Poems* (London: Dent and Sons, 1935) 127 [123-127].
- 3 Chesterton, ‘Defence’, 126-127.
- 4 Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God. On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). Page references in the text are to this work.
- 5 Hans G. Ulrich, *Wie Geschöpfe leben. Konturen evangelischer Ethik* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005) 19.
- 6 At one point in the book (248), this emphasis on the linguistic dimension of all human experience appears to complicate the realist impulse. Nominalism at least threatens in the claim that “[o]ne metaphor reveals (creates) one reality, and draws out a different set of features of experience”. Other affirmations in the book (e.g., 272) are less ambiguous.
- 7 Cf. 328: ‘Foreignness is, ultimately, the political, epistemic, and practical alienation of a world trying to save itself.’
- 8 ‘A true Christian ethical statement ventures in faith to propose a specific action in specific circumstances, and it does not take the form of a general claim about the good.... We discover our being in Christ when we give up our moral detachment and say, “Biblical text X and ethical consideration Y meet here in this situation, and demand a response”’ (260-261). In

failing to develop any extensive, direct ethical statements of this sort, is *Singing* (ironically) guilty of leaving undone what it asks its readers to do (cf. 68)? The charge, here as elsewhere, probably does not stick; a charitable reading will, at least, carefully factor in questions of tactics and genre before making much of such a claim. A more serious question is whether the book’s proper stress on moral descriptions involves a *de facto* material limitation in its understanding of the task of Christian ethics – a failure to consider with sufficient care ‘the transitions of thought between “descriptive” and “prescriptive”’ of which any form of moral realism must take account; see Oliver O’Donovan, ‘The Object of Theological Ethics’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 20.2 (2007) 210 [203-214], which puts this question to H. Ulrich, *Wie Geschöpfe leben*. In reflecting on this question, it is worth remembering that the text of *Singing* cannot simply be dissolved into its influences; whatever the interpretative gains of locating *Singing* alongside the work of Hans Ulrich, Bernd Wannewetsch and others in a putative ‘Erlangen school’, or indeed, in a longer tradition of broadly Lutheran ethics, the text has a distinctive integrity of its own that needs always to be recognised.

- 9 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics. Volume 2: God and Creation* (trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 342.
- 10 See the lucid reflections on this theme in Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).
- 11 See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:342.
- 12 On the conceptual transition between God’s eternal will and its realisation in time as it was handled by the Reformed Orthodox, see the concise review of the sources in Heinrich Heppel, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche* (Elberfeld: Friedrichs, 1861) 137-145. The basic movement might be summarised thus: All the works of God are deliberate; God is never unwillingly or unwittingly the God he eternally is. Thus the will of God, like the knowledge of God, is said to be identical with his essence. But this does not exclude the possibility that God could will the existence of another outside himself without detriment to his own blessedness. God can eternally and immutably decree freely to create and so to be the creator. In that the object of the decree is a reality external to God, it is not constitutive of the divine life; God would be the one he is even if he never decreed the world’s existence. Having so decreed, creation follows *ex necessitate consequentiae*; but its necessity is consequent *only* upon the free decree. So, in Voetius’ formula: ‘Creatio is an *actio ad extra*, and therefore free, and so accords with the decree. In addition it is outward and emanative, and so is distinguished from the decree’ (141).
- 13 Cf. the final line of 351, which almost certainly

should read 'the Bible allows no blurring of the line between creator [not 'creature'] and creation'.

- 14 John Webster, 'Wie Geschöpfe Leben: Some dogmatic reflections', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 20.2 (2007) 280 [273-285].
- 15 Or, with Psalm 130, the name of God is to be considered 'the anchoring centre of the textual space created by Scripture's many literary forms' (286).
- 16 'The port of entry into the Christian tradition is a reading of Scripture, not a theory of reading' (265).
- 17 Cf. 286: 'Theology that begins [by calling on the name of the Lord] is not best described as the expli-

cation or updating of a deposit of historical faith claims. It is more properly understood as joining a collective probing of God's unseen purposes for his people.' But why should the ongoing be so played off the given?

- 18 Oliver O'Donovan, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture', in Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (eds.), *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible. How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 165-175.
- 19 O'Donovan, 'Moral Authority', 166.
- 20 O'Donovan, 'Moral Authority', 174.

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