

In the “Thou” Business

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In what follows I will consider the vexed and long-standing contestation between the *covenantal-dialogical rhetoric* of the Bible and the alternative of *Cartesian-modernist rhetoric* that is everywhere around us. That contestation, so it seems to me, now has peculiar urgency among us. My current interest in this subject is triggered most immediately and quite practically by the bewildered comment of a “progressive” Protestant lay person who said, in innocence, “Since none of us believe all this YHWH-stuff, what are we to do with the Bible?” My interest, consequently, is a quite practical one, because there can hardly be any doubt that the rhetoric we employ yields the world in which we live. When the church loses its courage and freedom for public theological language that is relational and interpersonal, it will have lost most of its claim.

I.

There is no doubt that the Bible is deeply and resolutely committed to personal/interpersonal language that Martin Buber has notably characterized as “I-‘Thou.’”¹

1. YHWH, the creator of heaven and earth and the deliverer of Israel, is addressed as “thou” in doxology and is credited with being a lively character who has the undoubted capacity for decisive agency.

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you healed me.
O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
and restored me to life from among those who had gone down to the
Pit...

You have turned my mourning into dancing;
You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy. (Psalm 30:13,
11)

For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
You have brought us into the net;
you have laid burdens on our backs;
you let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. (Psalm 66:10-12)

Even “descriptive Psalms” that speak of YHWH in the third person credit YHWH with decisive agency (Pss. 145:14-20; 146:7-9).

Thanks tends to be more specific than praise, and therefore the intimate address of “you” seems natural and appropriate:

I give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart;
 before the gods I sing your praise;
 I bow down toward your holy temple
 and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithful
 ness,
 for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.
 On the day I called, you answered me,
 You increased my strength of soul.
 All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,
 for they have heard the words of your mouth. (Psalm 138:1-4)

The praise and thanks of Israel constitute speech acts whereby Israel gladly cedes itself over to God in wonder (as in praise) and in gratitude (as in thanks). These self-transcending and self-yielding acts are clearly evoked by and aimed toward a remarkable character who has both a narrative past and a promised future with Israel.

2. The “thou” language of Israel is even more direct and intense in Israel’s poetry of lament, complaint, and protest. The second person pronoun figures large in Israel’s accusations against God. The direct language of prayer does not linger over secondary causes, but readily attributes trouble to God as the primary cause. Perhaps most familiar and famous is the “unredeemed” speech of Psalm 88:

You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
 in the regions dark and deep.
 Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all our
 waves.
 You have caused my companions to shun me;
 You have made me a thing of horror to them...
 Your wrath has swept over me;
 your dread assaults destroy me.
 They surround me like a flood all day long;
 from all sides they close in on me.
 You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
 My companions are in darkness. (Psalm 88:6-8, 14-18)

The petitionary summons to God that God should respond and intervene are, perforce, in the imperative of the second person. Israel exhibits stunning courage in addressing God in imperatives, a mode of speech that I characterize as *provisional role reversal* in which Israel seeks to command YHWH, a role reversal in urgency that is commensurate with the speaker’s dire straits:

Rise up, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! (Psalm 3:7)
 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
 O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.
 My soul is also struck with terror,
 While you, O Lord—how long?
 Turn, O Lord, save my life;
 deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love. (Psalm 6:1-5)

O Lord, my God, in you I take refuge;
save me from all my pursuers,
and deliver me...
Rise up, O Lord, in your anger;
Lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies;
awake, O my God; you have appointed a judgment. (Psalm 7:1, 6)

Rise up, O Lord! Do not let mortals prevail;
let the nations be judged before you. (Psalm 9:4-6, 19)

Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand;
do not forget the oppressed. (Psalm 10:12)

These prayers voice an intensity, a connectedness, and a leverage that are possible only in the direct address of dialogic speech. All the way from exuberant praise through aggressive imperative to energetic gratitude, all the way from praise through lament to thanks, Israel addressed God in intensely personal terms and could do so in no other terms.

3. The “Thou” of God can speak as an “I,” a magisterial practice of self-announcement, self-resolve, and agency. YHWH is a robust defining character in the rhetoric and imagination of Israel. God is self-affirming and self-celebrating in self-praise. God unembarrassedly offers self-doxology in which YHWH struts before the nations and before the other gods.

When the poor and needy seek water,
and there is none,
and their tongue is parched with thirst,
I the Lord will answer them,
I the God of Israel will not forsake them.
I will open rivers in the bare heights,
and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water
And the dry land springs of water.
I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
The acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together,
So that all may see and know,
all may consider and understand,
that the hand of the Lord has done this,
the holy One of Israel has created it. (Isaiah 41:17-20; see 43:11-13;
44:24-26; 46:10-11)

The “I” utterances are not only world-defining; they are also world-disrupting. The divine utterance dramatically changes everything for Israel who hears the doxology.

4. Thus the “I” of YHWH resounds in oracles of judgment wherein God resolves to take action to reclaim governance where it has been diminished or disregarded.

Thus in the Exodus narrative,

I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord. (Exodus 14:4, 17)

Therefore I will take back my grain in its time,
and my wine in its season;
and I will take away my wool and my flax,
which were to cover her nakedness.
Now I will cover her shame in the sight of her lovers,
and none shall rescue her out of my hand.
I will put an end to all her mirth,
her festivals, her new moons, her sabbaths,
and all her appointed festivals.
I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees,
Of which she said, "These are my pay
which my lovers have given me."
I will make a forest,
And the wild animals shall devour them.
I will punish her for her festival days of Baal....(Hosea 2:9-13;
see Amos 4:6-11; Jeremiah 5:14-17; Ezekiel 16:41-42)

5. The divine "I" of self-praise and of judgment, remarkably, is capable of reversal of field, to pledge one's self to a promise-filled future wrought only by the generosity of divine resolve through the processing of divine pathos:

How can I give you up; Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?...
My heart recoils within me;
My compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath. (Hosea 11:8-9)

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in?
As often as I speak against him,
I still remember him.
Therefore I am deeply moved for him;
I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 31:20)

On such a basis of a complex interior life that the divine "I" resolves to restore Israel fully and to revivify creation that has been defeated and lost through divine anger:

I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will de-

stroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ezekiel 34:16; see 36:29; 37:12-14)

The self-declaration of YHWH in a first person pronoun matches the second person address of Israel who does not doubt the reality of the connection. Thus Israel can discern in its life the making, the unmaking, and the remaking of all reality by the agency of YHWH. Israel's rhetoric exhibits an awareness that every facet of this drama of death and life is wrought through an agency other than its own. It is an act of immense *chutzpah* of the highest order to dare to give name and voice to the character of freedom and fidelity on which everything depends.

The outcome of such sustained rhetoric is that the world is rendered in a dialogic way in which the self-announcement of Israel is matched and overmatched by the self-announcement of God. Faith is the capacity and readiness to participate fully and confidently in that on-going exchange, an exchange that has become the substance of memory and of hope, and of buoyancy in the present.

II.

I have taken so long with so many texts in order to focus on the fact that in the modern Western world, *the credibility and effectiveness* of this dialogic rhetoric has been seriously interrupted and disrupted. That interruption/disruption has occurred with the rise of modern rationality that was, in some sense perhaps, a response to the sectarian failure of European Christian theology in the seventeenth century with its quest for an alternative rhetoric and an alternative practice of faith and reason.² The explorations of Rene Descartes and the genius of Isaac Newton converged to produce a world that was mathematically exacting, that was universal in its credibility, and that made the world ordered and predictable in a mechanical way.³ That ordering, functioning to produce manageable knowledge of the world, served the expansionist propensity of the European powers in the pursuit of economic domination through exploration and colonialization.

One consequence of such a rationality that carried all before it was that the dialogic logic of faith came to be judged to be primitive and pre-rational, a logic that could yield only a world of superstition.⁴ Thus modern rationality produced, instead of such "superstition," a generic mode of "religion" in its quest for universal truth and, as James Buckley has shown, out of such generic universal categories Christian faith was to be defended in the early modern period in distinctly non-Christian categories, that is, according to the closest reasoning that conformed to the mathematical requirements of Cartesian, Newtonian reason. Seen from that perspective, the practice of dialogic language seemed irrelevant and foolish. *Such dialogic speech constitutes rhetoric freedom and fidelity.* Clearly modernist categories cannot not allow for such daring freedom that is seen to violate what passes for symmetrical inviolate "universal order." That perspective has no patience for fidelity and the risk of infidelity when the modern alternative can safely reduce everything to reasonableness that can yield certitude. I deliberately interface and contrast *fidelity and certitude*. Because of a confusion of categories, *the hunger for fidelity* is often mistaken among us to be *a quest for certitude*. That confusion leads to the seeking for a relational reality by reducing it to a cognitive claim, a reduction that misleads and distorts, and fails to satisfy.⁵

The result of this disruption, as concerns Scripture study, has been deep and all

inclusive. It has resulted in a “history-of-religions approach,” so that all faith articulations, including that of dialogic practice, came to be seen as nothing more than human imagination and human projection. Resistance to such *historical relativism* in turn evoked *absolutist propositional language* that eventually became fundamentalist. Such scholastic absolutism was cast in the same rationalistic categories, so that both the relativists and the absolutists confirmed and adhered to the requirements of modern reason. The struggle between faith and modern rationality has culminated in a continuing antagonism between *eighteenth century absolutists* and *nineteenth century relativists* that we now label as *fundamentalism* and *liberalism* (or “*progressivism*”).

That crisis in Scripture study was acknowledged only belatedly, notably in the remarkable, brief article of Langdon Gilkey in 1961 in which he spoke of “The Travail of Biblical Language.”⁶ Gilkey argued that biblical rhetoric about “the God who acts” struggles mightily to be intelligible. In his attempt to locate language that would adequately express universal and immanent meaning, Gilkey concluded that the language of “God who acts” is unintelligible. It is impossible to overstate the influence of Gilkey’s article and his line of reasoning in the wake of the so-called Biblical Theology Movement with particular reference to the work of Gerhard von Rad and G. Ernest Wright.

It was not much noticed that Gilkey’s argument, without acknowledgement or self-awareness on his part, simply took for granted that “intelligibility” meant and had to mean conformity to the Enlightenment rationality rooted in Descartes and Newton. That is, such mathematical predictability precluded any thought or speech about divine agency that could violate such order. Consequently the dialogic rhetoric of biblical faith turns out to be nonsense, that is, *nonsense from the angle of modernity*.

I suggest two extrapolations from this wholesale disruption. On the one hand, the “character of God” has been transposed from an active subject to a harmless object that is no more than an image, an icon, or an idol that is completely without capacity for agency. The disposal of YHWH as agent echoes the cynical verdict reported by Zephaniah: “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm” (Zeph. 1:12; see Psalm 115:4-7).

In the end we become like that which we worship (see Psalm 115:8; Jeremiah 2:4; Hosea 9:10). When we worship flat object, we become objects and not subjects in our own history. And of course, power “from above,” divine or human, prefers us not to be subjects of our own history. The reference to “silver and gold,” moreover, suggests the reduction of agency to commodity (Psalm 115:5). In the modern world, that reduction that makes God impotent causes God to be banished from public domain and public relevance, and consigned to the safety of interpersonal interactions, thus a major abandonment of the claims of biblical faith.

The loss of dialogic articulation, rendered impossible in modernist rationality, has led to complete abdication of dialogic capacity, either before the coldness of absolute reality that is unbending, unengaging, and unresponsive, or before a complete conquest of reality by human ingenuity without answerability to anyone for anything. Either *cold absoluteness* or *totalizing subjectivity* leaves no possibility of mutual engagement of the kind that belongs to dialogic speech and life.⁷

III.

This disruption of dialogic speech and faith has two practical outcomes that we may consider. On the one hand, the outcome of unfettered human freedom has led to an unrestrained and undisciplined human control and exploitation of all visible reality. The pursuit of power is advanced by the remarkable capacity for knowledge appropriated in unfettered freedom, a knowledge enacted through limitless scientific imagination that is, in turn, generative of unlimited technological administration. The immediate and visible outcome of the loss of the dialogical is a technological rampage in the interest of control and an effort at self-sufficiency and self-security. Thus the continuing threat of nuclear damage (now not from bombs, but from power plants), the endless thirst for energy that produces such crisis as the Gulf oil spill, and the onslaught of global warming that jeopardizes the health of creatureliness are not aberrations but are the playing out of the extremity of the human eagerness for technological control.⁸

On the other hand, the crisis of technological reductionism is matched by a theological obtuseness that has in concrete ways *reduced faith to modernist rationality*. That reductionism is evident, of course, in fundamentalist circles that blithely sign on for the technological-capitalist engine of totalism. But more important, in my judgment, is the fact that theological “progressives” shiver in aversion to “an interventionist God” who may speak and act freely to upset the carefully arranged orderliness of a world under safe management. Such “progressives” cannot entertain the thought of a God who is free or faithful or sovereign enough to assert purpose in the real world. It is impossible in such a purview to imagine a dialogical, covenantal exchange in which there really is *a voice and agent from the other side* that is other than our own. The practical outcome of such theological reductionism is to “down-size” the mystery of God to modernist proportion so that there is no meaningful theological dimension to human discernment or practice. There is then in fact nothing left to say that might critique, restrain, or summon the self-serving system of control that is beyond criticism or alteration. The God “approved” in such context “will not do good or do evil”! Church rhetoric, in the wake of such reductionism, is in turn reduced to muteness or at best timid innocuousness.

IV.

The critical task, I suggest, is to think clearly about the cost and consequences of the anti-dialogical legacy that is indispensable for the world of knowing human control. It may now be time to reverse his proposition to consider the “*Travail of Modernist Language*.” That is, the work is to consider the deficits of such modernist rhetoric and the impossibly hard work such rhetoric has to do in order to carry more than it is able to carry. Specifically the transposition of our rhetoric from dialogue to rational control has meant the loss of the categories of freedom, fidelity, and responsibility, and inevitably the loss of the notion of neighbor or neighborhood, that is, nothing less than the disappearance of “the common good.”⁹ The “turn to the subject,” that is, the preoccupation with self, or more specifically “the possessive self” as the only agent, has yielded an autonomous agent who is not organically connected to any other.¹⁰

But the more important work in the emergency is the recovery of dialogic rhetoric that at bottom can generate a very different practice of humanness in the world. The recovery of dialogic reality is the fundamental burden of Karl Barth in his explosive

commentary on Romans. Barth saw that without that voice from the other side, there can be no dialogue of an ultimate and defining kind. Barth witnessed, after the witness of Paul, to the shape, quality, and order of reality that refused and violated all the reductions of monologue. The legacy of Barth has most recently been brought to terse expression by Robert Jenson:

It is time and past time for the church to say without hedging that modernity has it backward. Few would want to eschew modernity's many material and political blessings, but the way in which modernity related truth and tradition is now manifest as the great error that it was, and indeed, as culturally and even demographically suicidal error....We must summon the audacity to say that modernity's scientific/metaphysical metanarrative...is not the encompassing story within which all other accounts of reality must establish their places, or be discredited by failing to find one. It is instead a rather brutal abstraction from reality....As pop scientists urge over and over, the tale told by Scripture and creed finds no comfortable place within modernity's metanarrative. It is time for the church simply to reply: this is certainly the case, and the reason it is the case is that the tale told by Scripture is too comprehensive to find place within so drastically curtailed a version of the facts. Indeed, the gospel story cannot fit with *any* other would-be metanarrative because it is itself the only true metanarrative—or it is altogether false.¹¹

This alternative to the Enlightenment rationality of modernity is an affirmation that linguistic, rhetorical, artistic, interpretive imagination, through the work of the Spirit, generates futures. Clearly such work of utterance requires *an utterer* and leads us to dialogic practice with a person and the personal that is outside and beyond us. This accent on the active personal as we ponder faith is recently probed by Marilyn McCord Adams as she thinks through the problem of evil: "Divine personhood offers systemic advantages where the problem of horrendous evils is concerned. For horror-defeating power is meaning-restoring power, and meaning making is personal activity *par excellence*!"¹²

In a world beset by limitless exploitation of "nature" and unrestrained savagery against neighbor, Adams's phrasing seems particularly pertinent. What is surely required now among us is power that is capable of "horror-defeating," "meaning-restoring," and "meaning-making." While human agents can address these dreadful issues in modest ways, faith attests a larger, more compelling, more effective personal agency, surely "the holy one in your midst." Of course for the "progressives" who continue to have confidence in the modern world that "has been so good to us," the horror is not seen to be so deep, and the loss of meaning not so acute when present manageable meanings continue to be available. But such an "innocent" view of social, worldly reality is possible only among those privileged and protected.

Such innocent claims, moreover, are indispensable when this rationality is given concreteness in the economic claims of capitalism.¹³ Such "innocent" faith, incapable of thinking or imagining outside the promise and possibilities of capitalism, reduces everything to commodity, and more than that, to measurable, manageable commodity that does not allow for the immeasurability and incommensurability of

the Holy One who can and does make all things new. Such innocence is a practice of totalism in which the narrative of sufficiency and control screens out and denies the real world of life and death, of estrangement and reconciliation, of enslavement and emancipation, of wealth and poverty, of despair and hope, of denial and truth.¹⁴

V.

In the end the crisis is a practical one and not a theoretical one. The practical issue is to disrupt the totalizing capacity of modernity-cum-capitalism by a rhetoric and by a life of freedom and fidelity. The faith community is not pledged to that modernity-cum-capitalism narrative or that rationality. The language and imagination of the faith community is of another kind, pledged to love God and to love neighbor, that is, to acknowledge *Another* who summons and compels us to regard *the other as neighbor* and not as threat or competitor. That mandate, rooted in Sinai, is a practical one that implies a different construal of social and economic power. That concrete and practical alternative construal, moreover, depends upon imagination that is carried and evoked by rhetoric.

For that reason, surely, the faith community cannot afford the “innocent” rhetoric of “progressives” who expect or welcome no initiative other than their own. For that matter, it also cannot afford the triumphal rhetoric of conservatives who traffic in absolutes. Neither such “innocence” nor such triumphalism can produce a viable world. A viable world depends on discourse that concerns freedom and fidelity and responsibility, all the language of dialogue.

Thus the most immediate and practical work of faith communities, I propose, is the recovery of the language of I and Thou and the nerve to trust it. Such rhetoric, deep in the tradition, attests an “I” who can self announce and a “Thou” who is present in tradition and in contemporary liturgical performance, the Thou who gives and commands and emancipates and summons and promises. Where that rhetoric is not practiced we are consigned, by our innocence or by our triumphalism, to a world of control, threat, anxiety, loneliness, and despair. The news that arises in dialogic exchange is that it need not be so. And because the “Thou” of the holy one has been found to be reliable, it will not be so.

The several monologues of modernity shrivel the human spirit and the human possibility. Israel’s dialogic language refuses such shriveling:

—*Doxology* is the glad *yielding* of self while the modern self never yields.

—*Thanks* is the voice of *gratitude* for gifts generously given; the modern self has no reason to be grateful or to give thanks or to hope.

—*Petition* is the insistent voice of *expectation*; the modern self has no one to address and so self does not expect or hope or ask.

Faithfulness listens; faith waits; faith hears. The Thou addresses and sometimes speaks a newness that authorizes a new world that can be given only in such utterance.

—It is *the speaking Thou* who *rejects hubris*.

—It is *the speaking Thou* who *undertakes possibility*.

—It is this *speaking Thou* who *imposes the pain of alienation* and then *reaches into that pain to embrace*:

—It is *this speaking Thou* who inhabits and *convenes alternative worlds* of fidelity and freedom.

The Church, even in a world of monologue, is in the “Thou” business. And that in a culture of conformist capitalism and illusionary freedom begins with “Thou” and ends with a feeble “I” who is soon dismissed. When the faith community refuses its proper rhetoric and opts for either innocence or triumph, the world is left in bottomless anxiety, a complete disruption of our humanness. It is in such a world, marked by innocence, triumphalism, certitude, and anxiety, that this Thou sometimes surprises, evoking new possibility.²⁸

Notes

1. Buber’s work is defining for the topic of the dialogical. See *Between Man & Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), and *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937).
2. On the impetus of such cultural anxiety, see Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987).
3. See Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
4. *Ibid.*, 207-208.
5. On the relational risks of fidelity, as contrasted with the flat offer of certitude, see Juergen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).
6. Langdon Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *JR* 41 (1961) 194-205.
7. The misconstrual of biblical testimony in the modern period has led to the exploitation of the earth. See Cameron Wybrow, *The Bible, Baconism, and Mastery over Nature: The Old Testament and Its Modern Misreading* (American University Studies, Series 7, vol. 112; New York: Peter Lang, 1991).
8. Philip Goodchild, *Theology of Money* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) 48, 57, 81, 84, has seen the intimate connection between the instability of the environment and the end of modernity, a connection he sees because modernity depends above all on stability.
9. See my exploration of the theme of “the common good” in biblical perspective, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).
10. See C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
11. Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 119-120.
12. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 81.
13. Goodchild, *Theology of Money*, 257-258, connects the dots: The disavowed spiritual energy that gives authority to such an autonomous subject is embodied in money. Money has replaced God.
14. On the violent potential of totalism, see Robert Jay Lifton, *Witness to an Extreme Century: A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 67-68, 381.