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Response to Reviews of *Dogmatic Ecclesiology Volume 1: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church*

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It is deeply gratifying to read four reviews of *Dogmatic Ecclesiology Volume 1*[1] which engage in such depth and with such generous critiques that enable iron to be sharpened on iron. One can hope for nothing better than these kinds of engagements with one's work as an academic, and the careful, thoughtful and challenging responses of my colleagues only serve to underline to me the respect I have for them as those from whom I have learned – and continue to learn – a great deal. I express my sincere thanks to them all for this engagement – not least given the length of the book! But I must confess that, in the process of writing a trilogy, it is particularly gratifying to receive comments and commentary for a project which is very much *in via*; and it is also gratifying – having planned out the volumes' structures – to be alert to the fact that many (if not all) of the issues raised are ones which feature in my plans for the subsequent volumes.

For the purpose of this response, I will focus on the probing questions of the reviewers more than the comments of appreciation, albeit noting issues in passing which have helped me learn better what I am doing myself: so often, we are not good judges of our own work, and the eyes of others help us to see more clearly what it is that we are actually doing. These reviews exemplify this reality, and where they are particularly perceptive in this way, I will note this. I will offer responses to each reviewer in turn.

Rachel Muers' review of the book offers a tremendously perceptive account of the ecumenical horizons and possibilities of the book, as well as the extent to which the book flows against most ecclesiological work, especially in the ecumenical sphere. Indeed, in one sense the book's approach offers the theological foundations and precursor to the ecumenical project itself, and in its (while decidedly Methodist) horizons of engagement, the book draws on

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1 Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology, Volume One: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

resources from across the broad Protestant family of churches, as well as pre-Reformation texts and post-Vatican II ecclesiology which often displays more Protestant instincts than much Protestant ecclesiology. In this way, the book seeks to offer a resource to enable a more honest dialogue to take place more honestly, rather than one which works with one set of assumptions about orders and polity, allowing these to set a (literal!) hierarchy of status for different churches involved in the ecumenical enterprise. This will, of course, be a tremendous challenge to those who have an account of the church which sees not just order but a particular form of order as indispensable to the account of the church and the possibility of unity.[2]

Muers' more critical interrogations involve the way in which we are to think about the image of giving the self over to God and the other as a principal image of our participation in Christ's priesthood: 'What should be said – if we follow Greggs' lead in looking for a properly theological response – about what "new life in Christ" means for the person whose sense of self and community were deformed by the effects of coercive control, persistent denial of agency, or

2 Muers' account is a very helpful one in comparison to the rather standard approaches to ecclesiology and ecumenism which marked the review of Paul Avis in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 74 (2021), pp. 274–8. Part of the urgency of the current project arises from the failures of the previous generations to make headway: church numbers in traditional churches in the Western world (and especially Europe) have declined at a frightening rate, and – despite all the discussion and efforts – we are no closer to visible unity (as evidenced in the recent failure – yet again – of the Methodist and Anglican Churches in England coming together). Avis' account relies either on the innate opposition taken to my account of priesthood separated from polity, or misrepresentation of the book and its claims – sometimes egregiously. Space does not allow a detailed account of these issues, but Muers' recognition of the radical difference of approach is a helpful temper to the kind of review which finds fault in the book for not simply repeating the status quo of ecumenical discourse over the last quarter of a century. Her comments deserve repetition:

> Clearly Greggs' argument is not likely to persuade those Christians who are committed on theological grounds to understanding specific orders of worship and/or of polity as indispensable attributes of the church as body of Christ – with all that that implies for the status of partners in ecumenical dialogue – that they should simply drop those commitments in the interests of better disagreement. However, what Greggs' approach does offer to ecumenical dialogue is encouragement to engage with deeper-level questions about (for example) the nature of church unity, the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, and the relationships between ecclesiology, Christology and soteriology – and to allow these questions and the substantive answers they receive to shape more of the ecumenical agenda, rather than being relegated, metaphorically or literally, to introductory remarks. (Rachel Muers, 'The One Thing Needful: The Ecumenical Value of a Theological Ecclesiology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 24 (2022), p. 279)

dehumanising relations of oppression?'[3] There are hints at the response to this centrally important question in relation to the discussions of race in the chapters on baptism and the congregation; and these are themes which will be developed in the following two volumes.

In terms of the current volume, the discussions of race *in passim* in the book are an indication of the kind of response to the question Muers asks, and how future volumes will proceed and themes which will be unpacked in them:

> It is incumbent upon white churches (so-called) to repent and to seek reconciliation with the beloved children of the Father and the fellow members of the body of Christ in other racial communities.[4] Indeed, until they do so, those white churches will not know their own identity in Christ as an identity constituted in relation to God *and to the given other in the community of the church* – an identity which is found primarily in baptism. The unity of the baptized community is one which arises from the act of God's salvation – from the reality of participating in Christ's humanity and His benefits, and from depending upon His grace known to and in us preveniently by the Holy Spirit through which we turn our hearts out with Him to God and to the rest of the world. It is because we acknowledge our sin and die to self in baptism that the community of the baptized cannot continue to express the sin of self-orientated power identities.[5]

The subsistent identity we have in Christ is not only an expression of letting go of our individualism in light of the primary identity of Christ; but it is also an expression of the way our identities in their particularities (including their oppressed particularities) have subsistent identities in Christ's own particularity (including his oppressed and cruciform identity), and how our identities find their particularities affirmed and transformed in Christ and his body:

> The other becomes constitutive of my identity in Christ in the other's given otherness, and if that other is simply a repetition of the self in whatever way, then we fail to know who I am in Christ and to have this identity constituted by an event of the act of the Holy Spirit in relation to the other in her otherness.[6]

If, as I have argued, in Christ's humanity we become more human in our orientation towards God and the other, this humanization is progressive in space-time and its givenness, and will have different forms for different people. Giving oneself over to others might involve differently and variously; the process

3 Muers, 'The One Thing Needful', p. 283.
4 To use Cone's language, we need to become 'black'. See, for example, James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 68–9.
5 Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology, Volume One*, pp. 187–8.
6 Greggs *Dogmatic Ecclesiology, Volume One*, p. 347.

of decentring from the power we have in relation to others in finding our power and identity reorientated in relation to the crucified Christ who is sovereign Lord of all; or decentring from the powerlessness we have in finding our identity and power affirmed, raised up and transformed in Christ. These processes will involve mortification and vivification of the self in distinctive ways in relation to the distinctive ways our identities will be affirmed and humanized as they participate actively and passively in Christ's humanity; and they will involve this in distinctive (perhaps even opposite) ways within the community as power relations and dynamics are differently relativized in Christ. In more concrete terms, the oppressed learns that she is constitutive of the identity of others in the community and that her life subsists in its humanity within the humanity of Christ: this raises her sense of self up. The oppressor, on the other hand, learns his sense of the self in terms of the other to whom he must now give himself over, be constituted by, and decentre his own life towards: this diminishes his ego from his individual desires for power and identity as an individual.

These are themes I intend to develop further in the subsequent two volumes. The second volume on the encountering prophetic apostolicity of the church will consider the prophetic focus on justice and righteousness, as well as the encounters with Jesus that take place in the Gospels – encounters which humanize, restore and build up the poor, oppressed and outcasts. The third volume intends to consider how we are transformed by the kingly holiness of the church, taking its cue from the form of Christ's kingship – the form of manger and cross.

This leads helpfully to my comments about the careful and helpful review by Mike Allen, since it is the prophetic and apostolic nature of the church, indeed, which marks the principal response to the review of Allen with regard to the role of sin, atonement and sin-bearing. Allen is right in his observation, and correct in his interrogation:

> Greggs focuses much more about mediation than upon sin-bearing, more upon sacrificial vulnerability than upon sacrificial atonement. Salvation appears regularly in the text, but it has relational and communicative connotations far more than atoning emphases. Greggs could argue that participation and relational harmony are deeper needs than deliverance from or sacrifice for sin. He would be right. Covenant and eschatology are both deeper realities than soteriology itself. Fellowship and the communication of greater blessings are aspects of creation itself and, unlike soteriology, do not arise only upon the transgression of sin. Yet sin remains focal and central to scriptural teaching on priestly mediation, and that sin-bearing emphasis surely occurs upstream of polity too.[7]

7 Michael Allen, 'Priestly Catholicity: On Tom Greggs' *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 24 (2022), p. 291.

However, these are themes I wish to retain for the volumes on the prophetic and kingly. There are reasons for this which are associated with my desire to remove from the church's understanding of priesthood the kind of polity which sees ongoing priestly action held by some group within the church as somehow related to forgiveness of sin, or to a modern enactment of the priestly life of Israel (hence part of the reason for holding the Leviticus material back). But I do wish to introduce these themes directly in the prophetic material: it is, after all, the prophets who call us back from sin and to encounter God's righteousness. We might say that the prophets' job is to make the priests better priests. In encountering the prophetic Christ, we are confronted with the light that shines on our life of sin; we face the truth of who we are and the need for repentance and divine expiation; we pray for forgiveness and seek to speak the truth. But this 'no' is surrounded, as Allen observes, by the primal (covenantal) and teleological (eschatological) 'yes' (although, I am not sure even – as I try to explain in the volume – fellowship is a blessing of creation; rather it is an eschatological grace which breaks in from redemption). Another way to put this, in language used in the book, is to say God's holiness from us is for creation, and in light of this, we understand what it means that God's holiness is other than creation: we only know of the holiness of God because it first reaches out to us, which is an act of grace.

This also addresses why start where I do: I believe we should seek God where God is found, in the good news of the gracious economy of the divine life: the life of discipleship, the life following encountering Jesus and being filled and formed by the Spirit, the holy call of the Christian life and its otherness are second moments to the fundamental disposition of the divine life to be for creation. It is only in light of Christ and the Spirit's economy which is underscored fully by grace that all else can be explored. There is an asymmetry in this: a 'yes' which precedes, surrounds and completes the 'no'. I am grateful to Allen for recognizing the impact of my (first) theology teacher, colleague and friend, John Webster, on my work. But John and I disagreed on the extent to which we can separate the order of being from the order of knowing in order to begin all theological discussion with divine simplicity and the immanent life of God. I simply do not believe Scripture allows that: even when God appears in theophany, even when the immanent life of God is pictured, it is always – from the creature's perspective – discussed in the context of the economy; how could it be other since it is only because God reveals Godself to us that we can know anything of the constancy of his triune life? This clearly does not mean I am not orthodoxly trinitarian – simply that I do not think the immanent life is where we should begin. For this reason, I am reserving more direct reflection on the immanent Trinity for the third volume which will address the Holy Spirit as the one who 'with the Father and the Son is to be worshipped and glorified'. Proportionality in relation to talking about the immanent trinity in theology is an issue I have

addressed before and written on subsequent to the publication of the volume.[8] It is clear enough that I do not, as Allen recognizes, follow social trinitarian approaches to the themes I write about. There are a number of reasons for this: I have written elsewhere about these things; I am (as I hope is clear in what and how I write) deeply 'Western' in approach to triunity; I feel that others have done this work already; temperamentally, I am always inclined to try to say what I do positively rather than by opposition (as the final chapter indicates); and – perhaps most importantly – the book was already far too long and discussion of each avenue untaken would have expanded it to something even more unwieldy. This inclination to be temperamentally positive is something I learned from both my mentors—David Ford and John Webster. I am less inclined than certain kinds of Reformed theologies, perhaps, to look for a bounded group in theological speech, and more concerned to try to create a centred group. This may, indeed, reflect my Methodist and Pietistic sensibilities within Protestantism, sensibilities, indeed, reflected in the very account of catholicity offered in the volume.

One final comment on Allen's helpful discussion is required around event language which he see as adding 'unneeded difficulties in rightly acknowledging the subordinate necessity of tending to the church as a concrete reality'.[9] Clearly, the church (and the theology which derives from it) has always sought to find 'short-hand' means of offering coda on the biblical narrative and theology, and my 'event' language seeks to do just that: to capture the fact that the church exists as a result of the act of divine grace, but not to confuse this with the idea that the church is synonymous with the *actus purus et singularis* of God. The church is an event of the Spirit's act since it is not to be confused with the sum-total of the Spirit's act: the Spirit is at once intensively present in the church and extensively present in all creation.[10]

In many ways the very generous review of John Bradbury captures these last two points very well. Bradbury's review unpacks and reflects upon the Methodist and Reformed instincts I have as a Methodist very shaped by Karl Barth and the Reformers. Recognizing the central importance of the doctrine of election to ecumenical disputes within Protestantism and the effect of Barth's redefinition of the doctrine, Bradbury kindly writes:

> It perhaps takes a Methodist theologian who is steeped in Calvin, Barth and Forsyth (to this author's wry Reformed amusement, there are more references to Calvin in the index than Wesley!) to reach ecclesiological

8 See Tom Greggs, 'Proportion and Topography in Ecclesiology: A Working Paper on the Dogmatic Location of the Doctrine of the Church', in R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky and Justin Stratis, eds., *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John Webster* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), pp. 89–106.

9 Allen, 'Priestly Catholicity', p. 289.

10 On this, one can do little better than consider Daniel W. Hardy, *God's Ways with the World: Thinking and Practicing Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

> conclusions rooted in having moved beyond each of the positions that were for a period so deeply entrenched.[11]

Bradbury describes the possibilities of this as 'pan-Protestant' which captures very well the desire I have, as well as the desire to write a centred, rather than bounded, Protestant ecclesiology. Of course, that instinct itself might well, perhaps as Bradbury argues, suggest some form of Pietistic (Methodist) impulse, rather than an approach to ecclesiology in a manner which is somehow unsatisfactory to more doctrinally focused church denominations, even while the book seeks to be overtly 'dogmatic' in approach.

Bradbury also offers some helpful insights as well to the distinctively Protestant contours of the volume in comparison to Roman Catholic and Orthodox approaches. While he helpfully (like Muers) recognizes that the book 'potentially opens up a long overdue ecumenical conversation between Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and the Orthodox traditions regarding the relationship between the christological and pneumatological foundations of ecclesiology within Trinitarian theology',[12] he also notes the key issue at stake between Roman Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiology, on one side, and Protestant ecclesiologies, on the other, is that of provisionality. He writes:

> This in and of itself might suggest that the ecumenical impasse about polity and orders ultimately has more fundamental roots, which perhaps require more detailed ecumenical consideration. A more basic divide between Protestants and their Catholic and Orthodox sisters and brothers perhaps lies in the question of the contingency of the polities and orders of church life. To what extent is the form of the church contingent (upon the act of the Spirit within contingent world history) or universal and fixed? Behind this, perhaps, lies a more foundational question about the nature of the Trinity.[13]

These, indeed, are themes I have discussed elsewhere in more direct engagement with ecumenism and the theological and ecclesiological presumptions that lay behind much of these.[14] I am glad that Bradbury is able to recognize both the ecumenical desires of the book, but also the desire to shape ecumenical discourse in more profoundly theological ways: 'In a sense, what *Dogmatic Ecclesiology* might be said to do is to set an ecumenical agenda that is concerned with exploring this systematic doctrinal framework that might throw more light on why polity and orders have become the sticking points

11 John P. Bradbury, 'Election, Church and World: A Reformed Appreciation of *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 24 (2022), p. 297.
12 Bradbury, 'Election, Church and World', p. 298.
13 Bradbury, 'Election, Church and World', p. 305.
14 Tom Greggs, 'The Catholic Spirit of Protestantism: A Very Methodist Take on the Third Article, Visible Unity and Ecumenism', *Pro Ecclesia* 26 (2017), pp. 353–72.

they have'.[15] Whether or not I take up the kind but equally terrifying suggestion that I accept the challenge of writing a complete systematics is something which must belong to the future, and can only exist in some kind of eschatological provisionality itself.

Addressing, finally, the insightful and challenging review of Julie Gittoes,[16] there are three issues to which I would like to respond. While we come from different bailiwicks ecclesiologically (Gittoes herself is an extraordinary Anglo-Catholic ecclesiologist whose work has done much to focus discussion on the Eucharist and its implications of the life of the community), we both pursue ecclesiology with (to use a word from the title of one of her books to which I contributed) generosity.[17] To that extent, her response and engagement is precisely what I would have hoped for in light of the comments in both in the Preface and Conclusions regarding motivating other modes of thick theological reflection rather than attempting to provide some final, concrete account.

Firstly, Gittoes tackles the difficult reality we must all confront within the church – the reality of sin inside the church and its structures, the abuses of power associated with that and expressed in its worst and sharpest form in the child sex scandals that have destroyed the reputations of communities and the faith that people might place in the church. I am very much concerned that these empirical realities (better horrors!) of a community – which is (as I say in *Priestly Catholicity*) *simul iustus et peccator* – are confronted. A good deal of my earlier work as a theologian surrounded the category of religion as a hamartiological concept, and it is this which will motivate to some degree the discussion of the prophetic in the second volume of the ecclesiology.[18] The prophets speak out against unrighteousness in the people – often expressed in terms of the injustices and oppression brought about by abuses of power that arise from failing to acknowledge and live within the righteous grace of God. Understanding what it is to be a prophetic church involves understanding what the prophets would say to us, as the priests, in terms of our own failings. Constant confession and asking for forgiveness (of ourselves and of our community) are essential aspects of the prophetic life and ministry of the church; and I am grateful for Gittoes drawing attention sharply to the worst excesses of power abuses that we have engaged in within the church – ones in fact we might trace right back to the origins of Christendom.

15 Bradbury, 'Election, Church and World', p. 306.

16 Julie Gittoes, 'Participation in the Body: The Gift of Physical Particularity', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 24 (2022), pp. 307–14.

17 Tom Greggs, 'A Strangely Warmed Heart in a Strange and Complex World: On Assurance and Generous Hope', in Julie Gittoes, Brutus Green and James Heard, eds., *Generous Ecclesiology: Church, World and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM Press, 2013), pp. 120–39.

18 Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

The second theme of Gittoes that I want to address is her wonderful encouragement to consider blessing. While I am unsure that sacraments might offer blessing in a distinctive way in the church to other forms of blessing,[19] the need for the church to receive and offer blessing is a key aspect of its vocation. Space does not allow a thorough-going account of how I intend to unpack this; but I hope to discuss real presence in relation to the resurrected Jesus who eats with his disciples and commissions us to baptize with the promise he is with us always in the second volume in relation to prophetic apostolicity: this is both a calling forth to the future anticipation of unmediated presence with Christ (prophetically) as well as an expression of our apostolic commission which is meaningful in relation to the one who in his resurrection sends us with the authority that comes from his presence with us. Furthermore, the kingly work and life of the church is also a means to discuss blessing and anointing as well as the transformation which is brought by the Spirit in worship and communion in our worship being transformed into an offering and our communion being one with the heavenly banquet. These issues clearly need great unpacking, but they are issues I wish to address.

The third, and final, theme of Gittoes is an appropriate place to end for a world which has been ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic. *Priestly Catholicity* was published only the month before the first cases of Coronavirus outside of China. Gittoes recognizes the key importance of physicality in the 'horizontal' relations I describe and how these are so central to the blessing that the church is – a blessing which we have felt the lack of and desired through the preceding years with lockdowns and social-distancing. This context has indeed made me all the more aware of the need for a thicker account not only of participation (Volume 1) and transformation (Volume 3) but also encounter (Volume 2): the encounter we have with the living Jesus in the *body* (which includes its bodies) of the church as well as the encounters we find with Jesus in the stranger, the poor and the oppressed.

I remain deeply grateful to my colleagues from across the globe and different theological contexts and commitments for such thoughtful, careful, thought-provoking and gracious engagement with the first volume of my ecclesiology. To publish in three volumes enables the chance to think, discuss and learn from others – ecclesially – and these reflections and interrogations will no doubt shape the form and content of the volumes to come.

19 See my discussion of sacraments as a genus in Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology, Volume One*, pp. 149–59.