

The Seminar on God and the Human Future

A Report on the 2018 Fall Meeting

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Session One

The Notebook Project: The Theological Legacy of Schubert M. Ogden

The first session was devoted to the *Notebooks* of Schubert M. Ogden, whom Robert Funk had called “the most honest theologian.” Ogden’s theology is significant because of its desire to critically reflect on “the Christian witness,” that is, the reports we have of Jesus’ life and teachings. This means that Ogden is concerned principally with two things. (1) Theology needs to be consistent with the earliest apostolic reports about Jesus, which means it needs to be concerned with historical-critical scholarship and interpretive issues surrounding early Christianity. (2) The credibility of Christianity needs to be considered in light of human experience, which requires philosophical, secular reflection on that experience. As a result, Ogden’s theology draws heavily on both philosophy and biblical scholarship.

Ogden’s published works may be fairly well known, but his students have long known that he worked his thinking out through his notebooks. Ogden’s editors eventually chose to present them through an online database which has been nine years in the making and is still in progress. A hard copy is now available of a selection of his notes called simply, *Notebooks* (Schubert M. Ogden, Cascade, 2018).

Phillip Devenish, Ogden’s literary executor, began the session by giving a brief introduction to Ogden’s thought¹ and citing Augustine’s “desire to know God and the soul.” For Ogden, as for Augustine, that’s it. There is nothing else. Ogden’s project is a systematic philosophical theology, for which he has three criteria: its claims must be philosophically credible, fitting their situation, and accurately Christian.

Devenish then made his overarching claim: Ogden’s “systematic Christian theology” constitutes what, in Kant’s lingo, is ‘prolegomena to any future Christian theology,’ one that is as pre- as it is post-orthodox; not a revision, but a sea-change.”

For Ogden, Devenish said, “being ‘Christian’ has nothing whatever to do with whether a claim is true.” “Christian” and “true” are mutually independent judgments. For Ogden, this means first recognizing the difference be-

tween the Jesus inherited through Christian tradition and the historical Jesus who inspired that tradition. The Christian tradition receives Jesus second-hand—through the witness of others. Ogden’s project then is to try to get at the Jesus of direct human experience and the earliest and most authentic reports of his life, rather than the one inherited through the Christological tradition. That recovery of Jesus then needs to be read in light of philosophical reason. This requires critical-historical scholarship of the New Testament, philosophical rigor, and the willingness to test one’s conclusions against common human experience. Devenish finds in the *Notebooks* a dazzling breadth of detail in Ogden’s ability to follow this systematic thought down any avenue it might lead.

Alex Vishio (Central Atlantic Conference of the United Church of Christ) spoke next and emphasized that Ogden refused to engage in the “salvage operations” of his conservative New Testament colleagues. Christianity demands radical critique of itself, the first principle of which is, “We’re invited each moment of our lives to accept freely and wholeheartedly the demand of God’s love that Jesus presents and reveals to us.”

Brent Sockness (Stanford University) then reminded us, first, that Christian theology is critical inquiry and then made the point that Ogden’s *Notebooks* are as rewarding as they are difficult. For example, Ogden once sent Sockness a collection of 99 entries for Advent on “What is Metaphysics?” and “Transcendental Metaphysics.” The rigor and precision of those entries were astonishing.

Kevin Schilbrack (Appalachian State University) began his remarks with an anecdote about a retirement party at the University of Chicago for a well-known theologian. Ogden arrived and handed out his refutation of that thinker’s work. The work of theology is argumentation and evidence-based reflection, Schilbrack said. He argues that Ogden remains significant because of the question of truth. The question of whether or not something is Christian does not turn on whether or not it’s doctrinally Christian. It is rather fundamentally a question about whether or not it’s true. Rather than insisting on believing an untruth out of faith, it’s possible to discount doctrine if it’s found not to be true.

Mike Zbaraschuk began a round of discussion about the role of historical accuracy in Ogden’s theology. Why would Ogden pick the Jesus kerygma (the message of and about Jesus) as the norm instead of something else? Devenish replied that the answer is simple: it’s Protestantism at its core. One must go back to Jesus, not Augustine or someone else, to test whether or not you’re getting it right. Zbaraschuk pushed for clarification and asked if Ogden emphasizes

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the Jesus kerygma because it is historical, rather than realistic. Devenish said yes, it's historical in the strictest sense. Sockness asked, what if the earliest documents of the canon don't get you back as far as you need to go? Devenish replied that one must go back as far as one can and use what is there. Zbaraschuk followed up by asking, if we don't have access to the history, then what of the existential experience? Do we have our religious experience where we are, without regard to historical context? If we can't get back to Jesus himself, Sarah Morice Brubaker asked, would that mean that for Ogden the early tradition, which might not be consistent with Jesus, is more important? Devenish responded, "Of course. Let the fire burn."

Alan Jay Richard remarked that Ogden was asking us to bet our life on something that is absolutely contingent, that is, what the earliest layer of the tradition just happens to be. The questions of "is it true?" and "is it Christian?" rest on an understanding of absolute, that is, non-contingent, reality. Devenish responded that Ogden doesn't want you to bet your life on the contingency of what happens to be Christian. That historical stuff is a matter of accurate Christian theology. But you are betting your life on the Truth part.

Maynard Moore commented that Ogden was always very clear that a Christian theologian has a special responsibility to be faithful to the tradition. The theologian has to depend on philosophy for conceptual structure but has to go beyond that to formulate theological statements that are consistent with what we know about the nature of the universe. That's not an easy task when you also have to be faithful to the tradition. Devenish replied that he's a minister who has preached hundreds of sermons and found that getting back to the sources and the existentialist interpretation of what Christian faith is about is tough and challenging, but it engages people. One can't be properly constructive without also being properly critical. You must be honest about what you are denying and claiming to be false and provide something better. What the tradition itself believed Jesus meant to it cannot be killed. You can kill the man, but not his meaning.

Session Two

Why should we talk about God at all?

Presenters: Brandy Daniels, Marion Grau, Lori Brandt Hale, Tamsin Jones, Dan Peterson, Mayra Rivera, Marika Rose, Ted Smith

This session was a panel discussion with eight members. Each addressed the topic question for five minutes, followed by discussion.

God-talk becomes a matter of recognizing our responsibility to the creative, constructive imperative to imagine the world differently.

Ted Smith (Emory University) led off by announcing that he wouldn't answer the question, but he wanted to put particular pressure on the word *should*. Smith thinks that any *should* will lead to problems with whatever we might say about God. He argued that there are two possible reasons for talking about God. One, we should talk about God for the sake of social change because God-talk is powerful and mobilizing. Or two, we should talk about God because if we don't others will and they'll say things we don't like. But Smith insisted that the God worth talking about won't need our speech to do what God will do.

Then he suggested that *shoulds* that are related to duties might be better. But what sort of God would demand that? A *duty* to talk about God misses something about the best talk about God which is spoken in *love*. God-talk, said Smith, needs to arise out of a space of the deepest freedom. It must be voluntary.

Smith concluded that any speech about God that proceeds under the sign of *should* will be distorted. This isn't just a grammatical game. *Why must we talk about God?* is a better question, said Smith. This is the urgent *must* of the rush of a lover's desire.

Marika Rose (University of Winchester, UK) similarly began by interrogating the prompt of the panel. She argued that we must stop speaking about God insofar as talk about God becomes a way of disavowing responsibility for our identities and actions. In our context, the question of God is wrapped up in the histories and legacies of European colonialism and racism. God-talk becomes a matter of recognizing our responsibility to that context, but also the creative, constructive imperative to imagine the world differently. Modernity is marked by the secularization of theological concepts, transferring the characteristics of God onto the figure of the (white, wealthy, rational, male) political sovereign. Further, Rose explained, psychoanalysis decenters human beings from the world. We are neither the center of the world, nor even of our own selves. "We should speak about God," Rose said, "only if we can do so in order to take responsibility for what we are, because what we are is that which escapes us, which we cannot control but perhaps can acknowledge, confront, and accept when it bursts forth from us even at those moments when we least want or expect it."

Dan Peterson (pastor at Queen Anne Lutheran Church in Seattle) had set out to answer the question, "why should we talk about God at all?" by deciding to come up with ten reasons. For several months, he developed a list, but he could come up with only four. His first reason: the term "God" is a placeholder for pointing to what Paul Tillich referred to as the transpersonal or suprapersonal dimension of ultimate reality, something that impersonal substitutes

like “the Universe” cannot encompass. The second reason: substitutes for “God” fail to “grasp the center of the human personality” (Tillich) because of their impersonal, neutral character. Third, without adequate substitutes for God, it becomes difficult or impossible to express valuable feelings such as gratitude that we have toward the source of our existence. When we thank “the Universe,” the disposition of thanking itself illustrates that we related to the object of our feeling as if it were personal, even though by definition it is not. Finally, failing to talk about God or replacing God with impersonal terms cedes control to those who continue to use and abuse the term “God.”

Tamsin Jones (Trinity College in Connecticut) began with two fundamental points: we *should continue to talk* of God because, first, we study religion and, second, we should at least gesture towards transcendence.

On the first point, since we study religious traditions, when they talk about God or gods, we should, too. There may be a temptation to read religious statements as anthropomorphic projections. For instance, if we value strength and knowledge, we would then believe in a god who is all-powerful and all-knowing. There is nothing wrong with this approach in itself. It becomes a problem when it is the only or dominant thing that scholars of religion do because that amounts to a claim to know what religious belief and practice is *really* about. Jones argued that there’s an important difference between saying that religions are human artifacts and may be studied accordingly, and saying that any religious experience can “only ever be nothing more than a projection of a human desire, fear, or imagination and not in response to some “X” believed in, or related to, as transcendent—that is as a god.”

Jones’s second reason was born of the need for hope; not for a *deus ex machina*, transcendent, sovereign solution to our problems, but for a “space for transcendence.” Transcendence, said Jones, may be a placeholder for “God.” This transcendence is a space for hope “in order to avoid a totalizing or instrumentalist view of the world.” Jones insisted that this transcendence doesn’t need to be understood in opposition to immanence since it can only ever be encountered immanently.

Lori Brandt Hale (Augsburg University in Minnesota) began by telling us that her God-questions have never been metaphysical. Rather, she has been more interested in questions about identity and life together. So, “why talk about God at all?” prompted Hale to think in terms of ethics, rather than philosophy or even theology.

Without adequate substitutes for God, it becomes difficult to express valuable feelings such as gratitude that we have toward the source of our existence.

Why talk about God? Because we want a better future.

We have a responsibility to talk about God in order to embrace the experiences of others and to recognize how God shapes moral imagination and makes meaning. Conversely, we have a responsibility to talk about God when “understandings of God disguise or justify prejudice and cause harm. We have a responsibility to recognize it and name it and act against it.” In our intersectional and complex world, God-talk isn’t a mere ethical question, but a demand.

For Marion Grau (MF Norwegian School of Theology) the question, “why should we talk about God at all?” implies a specific form of monotheism. The very word “god” is a Germanic-Nordic term. It is white and Western, but Grau wants to use it nevertheless because that is how we can communicate with the majority of the world who uses religious language and images.

Within the modern, European intellectual project—which is also a colonialist project—there is a pressure toward secularization. In Norway, this has meant the repression of the way the Sami people interpret and interact with the world in light of their traditional spirituality. This was their most painful experience of colonialism—not the adoption of Christianity, but the repression of their spirituality. For indigenous people the world over, colonial encounters are spiritual battles.

Further, Grau is interested in how God-language is used, even within this colonial context. For instance, is God a metaphor or a power? “I am interested in talking about what the power or powers that move the universe are,” said Grau. We must remember the colonial pressure to secularize and hide religiosity. We must be willing to use language within that context that can alleviate the suffering caused by oppressive God-language. This means that we should provincialize the talk of God, recognizing that its forms are local to specific contexts. And finally, we must rewrite theology in ways that honor and confront other talk of divinity. We have to talk about “God” across cultures.

Brandy Daniels (University of Virginia) reiterated the session prompt but added, “What does God have to do with the human future?” More specifically, “not what does the future have to do with God, but what does God have to do with the future? There’s a directional correlation happening. Why talk about God? Because we want a better future.” Daniels admitted she doesn’t have answers, but she wanted us to consider what our investments in these questions are.

David Galston began the round of questions and comments by remarking that it was interesting how we avoided history to some degree because God tends to be historically

metaphysical. He suggested that some functional value to God in the human future may depend on how “God” is related to an open question about “awe” that can never be answered. Galston wondered about the role history might play in how we think about this question. Bray said there was a lot about history in this round of presentations, but it was the history of colonialism. She said that there’s an engagement with the sacred that disrupts a particular future—a colonialist future. Galston conceded the point and walked back his comment. Grau responded that when we talk about the God-language of the future we must articulate what kind of power is being associated with that God. She argued that we need to be willing to locate God-talk in its contexts. “Theology needs to be provincialized.”

Richard Carrier then told us that he’s an atheist and usually deals with conservative theologians, so this kind of discussion of God is not familiar to him. He asked the presenters if they believe that God exists and is a conscious agent. John Caputo recounted that we voted at the first meeting of the God Seminar that it would be post-theistic. In order to give this a certain shape, we would pursue a post-theistic conversation. Bray then pushed for clarification by asking how we are participating in a colonial process of secularization or how are we resisting that when we say “post-theist”? Theistic and secular is a problematic binary where both options have colonialist histories. In what ways do we use “post-theistic” to deconstruct that? Rose then added the topic of sovereignty keeps coming up in this conversation and asked how we might talk about un-sovereignty.

Peterson responded by discussing his location in Seattle, one of the most secular cities in North America. “How do I talk about God in a way that goes beyond those superficial conversations? Sovereignty is one of the problems with this conversation. We need to find different places to start—one of which is resisting the either/or,” he said. Grau suggested Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothee Soelle as atheistic theologians as resources for this ongoing conversation which argues that we need to live in the world as if there were no God, or as if God were as powerless as we are, suffering with us. David Hall added that the difficulty of speaking with secular students can be eased with “God” as a way to start a conversation with people who are fairly unreflective about religion. Devenish urged Peterson to say what he thinks about God and why this should draw forth worship. Peterson replied that he’s tried that. He rewrote the final stanza of “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” and discovered that he is inspired less by Paul Tillich, one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century, and more by the vulnerable God of Bonhoeffer and Soelle, but that’s not the default God. “When times are tough, the default God is the sovereign God and all the crap that goes with it.” Bray then cautioned us not to keep falling into the trap of uni-

versalizing concepts. Which people default to the sovereign God or to German theologians? Those are the defaults of people in particular contexts, not universal defaults.

Session Three

Varieties of Post-Theism—Book Workshop

Presenters: John D. Caputo, Elli Elliot, & Robin Meyers

Commentators: David Galston

David Galston began with a review of the votes that the God Seminar has taken since its Spring 2015 meeting, including seven sessions up until Spring 2018 in Santa Rosa. The God Seminar has voted seven times and the discussions that framed those votes are chronicled in the book, *Varieties of Post-Theism*. The first of the book’s seven sections regards the subject matter of theology and whether God is conceived as a supreme being or highest entity. The God Seminar voted overwhelmingly “no.” So the first section of the book is on the definition of theology when God-as-supreme-being is not at its center. The other sections of the book deal with (2) theology and culture with Paul Tillich, (3) atheism’s and post-theism’s relationships with biblical studies, (4) God and sovereignty, (5) God and nature, (6) God and atheism and religious naturalism, and (7) God and coloniality.

Elli Elliott, a writer and environmental activist in Red Lodge, Montana gave a response to the draft of the book’s introduction.² Her comments arose from three general perspectives: non-Christian or post-Christian thought, early Christianity scholarship, and intersectional environmental feminism. (Elliott’s use of the term “intersectional” here refers to the ways in which her feminism is affected by her environmentalism, and vice versa.) Environmental concerns may change when viewed through a feminist lens and likewise, one’s feminism will be affected by being concerned about the Earth. Elliott focused on the statement from the draft introduction, “our devotion first and foremost is to the mystery of faith and not the cardinal ordinances of any orthodox belief.” Elliott did not object to the latter half of that statement, but the invocation of faith concerned her. “As a post-Christian, I find the use of the term ‘faith’ exceedingly problematic,” she said. “It evokes a Christianized worldview that defines human experience using a Christian vocabulary it assumes to be universal.” She echoed comments from Session 2 about the God Seminar’s work and colonialist assumptions in the way it uses language and concepts.

As a scholar of early Christianity, Elliott pushed the issue of methodology in the God Seminar’s work. Specifically, some philosophers of religion and theologians engage with the Bible in uncritical ways that ignore decades of scholarship. This raises a number of questions including, “how should the Seminar on God and the Human Future interact with results of Westar’s scholarship on early Christianity?”

Third, Elliott focused on her intersectional environmentalist feminist critique of the work of the God Seminar. The issue here is primarily methodological. Elliott cautioned the God Seminar not to replicate “the Enlightenment pursuit of an ‘objective’ truth [through] using historical-critical methods infused with universalizing assumptions based on the experience of individuals from a specific sector of society.” Elliott advocated instead “the power of recognizing and unifying different experiences rather than imposing an elite perspective as universal.” Elliott ended her remarks by commenting on the God Seminar’s veneration for Paul Tillich. This shouldn’t be ignored or changed, she said, but since Tillich’s sexual improprieties are now well known and well documented, they need to be named and confronted if Tillich is going to be relied upon for the Seminar’s work.

Robin Meyers (Oklahoma City University and Mayflower Congregational UCC) presented next and began by arguing that a failing concept of God is at the root of many of our contemporary problems and self-destruction as a species. We have a first-class God-crisis on our hands and most are afraid to admit it, he said. The God Seminar is showing us a God who is not a flesh-and-blood character, but a figure that is consistent with contemporary scientific advancements, while remaining open to awe and wonder and a fantastically interconnected universe. If we venerate a God created in a world that no longer exists, we’re all fundamentalists.

Meyers commented that the introduction to the book is off to a very good start and he appreciated its humility. “None of us has any idea what we’re talking about when we talk about God. This gives credibility to the endeavor.” The tone of invitation in the introduction is also very important. The book is meant to start a conversation about a topic that is very important to a lot of people who may find our scholarship difficult. “You cannot have this conversation about nontheism without people asking: how do we pray? And how does a person have a meaningful relationship with something that is a non-person?” Meyers cautioned the God Seminar to be wary of elitism. It is important that the results of this book do more than motivate people to sign up for a variety of post-theism. “We want to give people the tools to work out their own God-salvation. It’s about making the world better.”

John Caputo (Syracuse University and Villanova University) began by calling for clarification of the terminology of the God Seminar. The title of the book is “varieties

of post-theism,” not “non-theism.” “Non-theism” implies a kind of atheism, possibly of the kind we don’t like. “Post-theism” implies we’ve passed through theism and the hermeneutic of suspicion.

Regarding Paul Tillich’s influence on the God Seminar, Caputo urged us to flag the issue of his sexual impropriety and not let it go. Tillich’s work set the stage for Mary Daly (radical feminist theology), James Cone (Black liberation theology), death-of-God theology, David Tracy (theological interpretation), and many others. They all go back to Tillich. Caputo has philosophical reservations about some of Tillich’s work, but we should not understate his importance for the work of our seminar, though we should not be blind to the issue of his sexual impropriety.

Unlike Westar’s historical seminars, Caputo said, we’re trying to get at something normative. There are good and bad ways to think about God and part of our job is to identify how concepts of God have been used destructively. The people Caputo speaks to have a default position on God. It’s not the sovereign God, but more in line with “the nones” (sociological shorthand for those who report no religious affiliation). It’s not nothing, it’s undecided. We need to get clear on who we’re speaking to. This question of the audience for the God Seminar keeps coming up and needs to be dealt with head on.

David Galston took up the question of audience by reminding us that the purpose of Westar is to undertake rigorous academic work, to present it to the public, and to improve religious literacy in society. It is scholarship in public for the public. That sometimes means we can’t address certain questions as deeply as we might wish.

Meyers circled back to the point about the default for a lot of people being the sovereign God. The folks Meyers talks to are less concerned with the attributes of God and more interested in the workings of God. Things are falling apart in the world in no small measure because people still assume that God acts, that God is an agent. Meyers argued that the most important thing we can help people with is to understand that God doesn’t do anything.

Elliott refocused the conversation on hegemony and echoed Marion Grau’s comments from Session 2. The God Seminar needs to be honest when its issues are male-centric or Eurocentric. We shouldn’t claim things as universal when they’re not. Karen Bray reminded us that we need to remember the situatedness of our ideas; they come from specific people and places and are not universal.

Continued on page 28

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