

MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY

The medieval theology workshop was devoted to the discussion of *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), by Kathryn Tanner. *The Politics of God* is a thoughtful and provocative meditation on the political ramifications of Christian belief. Well aware that oppressive and exploitative action has frequently been justified on Christian grounds, Tanner nevertheless argues for what she calls the "critical potential" of central Christian beliefs about God and God's relation with the world. Traditional Christian affirmations about divine transcendence, God's providential rule, and human sinfulness, she argues, have revolutionary implications and can, once disentangled from their illegitimate applications, more properly be employed in the pursuit of social justice. Directed in the first instance to other constructive theologians, political theorists, and ethicists, there is much in *The Politics of God* that recommends it as well to historians of Christianity. The book displays a deep historical sensibility, and Tanner has learned much from important theologians of the past, including Thomas Aquinas. Most significantly, as the discussion at the workshop made clear, the book has great potential for illuminating medieval Christian thought and practice, and, for disclosing the capacity of medieval thinkers to enter meaningfully into contemporary theological debate.

Joseph Wawrykow and John Cavadini, both of the University of Notre Dame, opened the workshop with prepared comments on *The Politics of God* from a medieval perspective. Wawrykow concentrated on three features of Tanner's work. First, especially valuable are her insights in the first chapter about the different ways in which belief and practice can be connected. Tanner insists on the dependence of practice on belief—action is rooted in beliefs about reality, and about appropriate ends and motivations, and actions become intelligible only when the ideas that inform them are grasped. Tanner also shows that given Christian beliefs need not issue in the same, unvarying practices: there is no inevitable, one-to-one correspondence between this belief and that practice, and a given belief can in fact issue in a variety of practices. Wawrykow illustrated the value of these reflections by reconsidering the analysis offered in a recent article by a medievalist that, in a medieval eucharistic setting, simply asserted without argument the inevitability of anti-Semitic behavior by disciples of the suffering Christ. At the least, Tanner casts doubt on such simplistic assumptions and urges historians to probe further into the causes of despicable practices.

Other aspects of Tanner's work, however, when seen from a medieval perspective, call for qualification. Strikingly absent from her list of Christian beliefs with "critical potential" are those having to do with Christ. Here, indeed, the contrast with an important medieval theologian such as Thomas Aquinas is telling. Although not always immediately evident, Thomas has in fact worked out his ideas about God and the creation and their relations in the light of Christ; his model may still prove instructive. Finally, Wawrykow suggested that Tanner's criticisms of what she terms (p. 85, n. 8) the "classical Thomist" version of natural law theory may be excessive. Tanner criticizes the theory for blocking the critical potential of the doctrine of divine transcendence, preferring to link that doctrine with an emphasis on God's providential rule. But, Tanner may in fact be the victim of the faulty reading practices of later Thomists, who at times fail to see Thomas's natural law theory in conjunction with other features of his theology, including his own insistence on God's providential rule. In short, when correctly read, Thomas on natural law may provide additional support for Tanner's constructive theological project.

John Cavadini too has found *The Politics of God* rewarding, showing in a lengthy exposition how Tanner's reflections on divine transcendence can further interpretation of a representative passage from Hildegard of Bingen. In Hildegard too divine transcendence offers a perspective for sociopolitical critique, bringing to the surface the pretensions masked by human sinfulness. Yet, the same passage in Hildegard also reveals the limitations of Tanner's discussion of divine transcendence. There is a profound christological cast to Hildegard's prophetic challenge, and the effectiveness of divine transcendence in disclosing sin is achieved precisely through its christological content. Cavadini reinforced his point about the close connection that should obtain between divine transcendence and the affirmation of the incarnation by a briefer, yet equally pointed exposition of a passage in Augustine's *City of God*. As Augustine acknowledges, the Platonists too were aware of a form of "divine transcendence." But, far from revealing the depth of sin or undercutting their pretensions, in their work divine transcendence, divested of Christology, simply advances the claims of the state to absolute power. As in Hildegard, there is then an insistence in Augustine on the close connection between an understanding of Christ and the teaching on divine transcendence: only when combined with the affirmation of God's self-giving in Christ, and the revelation of God's love and humility in becoming human, will the critical potential of the doctrine of divine transcendence find its full expression.

In her prepared response, Kathryn Tanner (Yale University) noted that she had included historians in the intended audience of her book and so welcomed these observations about her thought. Tanner's comments fell into three parts. She is gratified that her reflections on the diverse relations between belief and practices could contribute to the more nuanced appreciation of complex historical practice; she cautioned, however, that she would be uneasy if her reflections were

misused by employing them to disguise or to justify inappropriate Christian behavior in the past. Secondly, while intrigued by the suggestion that Thomas' natural law theory might offer greater support for her constructive theological and political project than she had suspected, she would leave the detailed demonstration of correct reading of Thomas on this matter to others; limning the connections between what Thomas says on natural law and other parts of his theology would divert too much of her energy from her main project. Tanner, however, acknowledged that she may have underplayed the significance of Christ in assessing the critical potential of Christian belief. Her decision to focus on her three main doctrines was dictated by historical considerations: these three doctrines have found common and repeated use in a variety of Christian theologies. Approaches to Christ, on the other hand, have been subject to greater fluctuation; not all insist on the centrality of Christ. Yet, it may well be that increased attention to Christ may promote an even more forceful expression of the critical potential of her favored doctrines.

The rest of the workshop was given over to discussion from the floor. Christology and the role of Christ in a "Christian" theology exerted considerable fascination. Some questioned the need to refer explicitly and repeatedly to Christ in working out theological positions, offering some Eastern and Western precedents for Tanner's practice in her book. Others, however, echoed the two presenters, suggesting that Jesus Christ provides focus to discussions of divine transcendence and God's providential rule. In a related vein, it was suggested that Tanner had paid insufficient attention to divine immanence, in the process presenting an imbalanced view of the divine transcendence.

Some attention was also directed to the reasons for the appeal of *The Politics of God* to medievalists. An especially intriguing proposal is connected to the observation that Tanner eschews referring to "experience" as a separate, autonomous source for theological reflection. In bracketing "experience," a post-Enlightenment category that remains ill-defined and susceptible to a wide variety of at-times conflicting uses, Tanner in fact mirrors the medievalists—they too prefer to think of Christianity rather in terms of "lived belief," with the beliefs derived from Scripture as mediated by the tradition. It was further suggested that in this return to the medievalists, Tanner may in fact help to overcome the confusion created by the modern recourse to "experience."

JOSEPH WAWRYKOW
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana