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Tanner's Theology-logy

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Genius is probably a category best avoided in theology.[1] Speaking genealogically, it is a Romantic idea that comes with a fair amount of complicated conceptual baggage, and that probably needs a good demythologizing fumigation before we use it.[2] It suggests a density of individuality, a self-possession in an author, which is more ideologically seductive than phenomenologically real. Certainly, we all have our heroes. Undoubtedly, we all seek our idols. This is as true of our attitude towards our contemporaries as it is towards the past. We are all, more or less, groupies. Typically, our admiration is most powerful when its object is least known to us; indeed our admiration may itself serve as impediment to our becoming genuinely

1. Many thanks to Paul Griffiths, Paul Jones, Joy McDougall, and Eugene Rogers for years, in some cases decades, of conversation on Tanner's work; to Christina McRorie, for reading this essay and offering very helpful critiques of it; and of course to Kathryn Tanner, for her generous teaching, and her more generous friendship.

2. Darrin McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); David Galenson, *Old Masters and Young Geniuses: The Two Life-Cycles of Artistic Creativity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Michael J. A. Howe, *Genius Explained* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

acquainted with the actual human whose books we read and whose voice we hear. To call someone a "genius" is, in this way, to distance them from us.

There is also another, specifically theological, hazard latent in the idea of genius. In Christian thought, seeking for theological genius is a category mistake. It misleads both hearer and speaker as much about the purpose of theological reflection as about the nature of our fellow humans. Theological insight is not a matter of subjective wisdom wrested from the cosmos by a soul wrestling with God; the individual thinker and author serves more as an antenna for the various theological transmissions surging through the atmosphere of their communities. There is a case to be made that the best theology is more often some peculiar condensation of a whole climate of opinion than it is some one person's theologically disciplined barbaric yawp across the roofs of the world. If there are any theological geniuses out there, they're likely at most one step away from being heretics.[3]

There is no contemporary thinker who serves as a better counterargument to the sentiments expressed in the above paragraphs than Kathryn Tanner. For whatever our complaints about and suspicions of "genius," the category does pick out a set of phenomena that bear some organic coherence, and we know that quite well from the evidence of Tanner. *Ingenium* originally meant a natural capacity or power, the innate capacity, a kind of graced capability not given to all; Tanner certainly has something like that. It is not a matter of effort that allows her to be so clever. None of this is to dispute her many years of labor; no one is as productive as she has been, or as reliably acute as she is, without effort. But the sheer gift is there as well, which she has then assiduously cultivated by her efforts. She is

3. I am informed here by Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

an alarmingly talented, indeed gifted, theologian. Is she not, then, a genius?

Here is where things get really complicated. If the term applies to her, her "genius" does not lie in some especially dense subjectivity on her part. It is not that her work bears, like a watermark, the indelible stamp of her metaphysically utterly distinct, haecceitatious quiddity; in terms of personality, she is more like what we know of Thomas Aquinas than she is like Martin Luther. However, it is the case that there is something deeply exceptional about the quality of her work, and of the mind that produces it. Her work strikes me as deeply, curiously, essentially undetermined by her teachers—while influenced by her teachers at Yale, her work is uniquely her own—and its impact is not clearly visible in her students. There is no "trajectory of thought" in which her work has participated. In this way she has no disciples, and no ancestors. There is no recognizable, reasonably textured narrative of inheritance and transmission, no picture of a theological "school" in which she plays a structural role. She is genuinely *sui generis*.

Yet, if she is truly unique, genuinely idiosyncratic, how can her work communicate so well? After all, she is recognized as a major figure in our field, not just brilliant but deeply relevant: trend setting, field defining, a person with whose views everyone must reckon, whose work everyone should read, who raises deep questions for all of us. Tanner's reputation as a "theologian's theologian" is unparalleled in this hemisphere; she is perhaps the most intelligent and far-seeing American theologian since Jonathan Edwards. Her only present-day rivals for global preeminence would be Rowan Williams, Sarah Coakley, and Jean-Yves Lacoste, with Robert Jenson, John Milbank, Eberhard Jüngel, and Jean-Luc Marion being borderline cases.[4] We admire her, and many of us stand in awe of her, but, can we learn from her? Not from her books, I mean; those

are full of lessons, and every one of us has access to them. I mean from her as an exemplary theological mind, as representing one way of doing theology and of being a theologian. What can we learn in *that* register?

I believe that her example does have lessons for us, despite her remarkable independence of mind, and that a crucial clue to finding them lies in the style of her reflections. One of the most curious facts about her uniqueness is her style, or rather her anti-style, the way her work seems intentionally designed not to call attention to itself. This is so in two senses. First, her prose style is remarkably transparent. It is unparalleled in its lucidity: plain and simple, low church, almost Shaker. She rarely uses esoteric technical terms (like *epekstasis* or *parousia* or *theologoumenon* or *askesis*, all terms I confess to having used and rather promiscuously); she rarely has multi-clausal sentences, or hypotactical constructions; in general, she eschews the complicated Technicolor grammatical pyrotechnics and showboating of which the rest of us are frequently guilty. I know of no other member of the guild of professional theologians and religious thinkers whose language is more straightforward or direct; her work is the best evidence I know that theological power and linguistic complexity (let alone difficulty) are two different things. There are hardly any sentences, in any of her books, that a good ninth grader could not read and understand; and there is no paragraph in her books that any high school graduate could not comprehend. Somehow, she has managed to write remarkably incisive and fecund works without succumbing to the siren-song of flashy academic fashion, hyper-

4. It is worth noting that her criticisms of Marion (in her "Theology at the Limits of Phenomenology," in *Counter Experience: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart [University of Notre Dame Press, 2007], 201-31) and Milbank (in her *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997]) are grounded in the two thinkers' being paradoxically too captive to modern categories, even as (particularly as) they react against them. As we will see in the rest of this essay, that is an especially significant kind of critique for Tanner.

technical esoteric jargon, or rebarbative prose that reliably courts incoherence, the confusion of linguistic difficulty and grammatical obscurity with insightful profundity. I do not know anyone else who communicates the achievement of direct effortlessness so frankly or straightforwardly. Across the past several generations, she must be the most impressive theologian with the least abstruse language.

Second, the names I associated with hers above, especially Lacoste, Williams, and Coakley, give a clue to another dimension of her work that is remarkably, for want of a better term, transparent. These three theologians share a capacity to move freely, quickly, and smoothly across centuries and regions—talking about Teresa of Avila one moment, Basil of Caesarea the next, and Simone Weil soon after. They have no homeland, no province of theology's larger story in which they are locals and whose provinciality tints their vision of every other era and tradition. They belong, in the best way, to the whole church, and the whole church belongs to them, as their heritage. (That the figures which we provincialists are so busy single-mindedly boosting would agree with them, and flee from us, is a quiet lesson that we devotees never seem to digest.) Tanner is unlike them, insofar as her work is not identified with some notable historical figure of a particular epoch. Indeed, she is *more* like this than they are, for all of them were initially associated with some thinker or set of thinkers (Williams with Russian Orthodoxy, Coakley with Troeltsch, Lacoste, a good French Catholic, with Heidegger), before they each moved beyond their origins over their careers. From the beginning, Tanner's work was never so identified; she has always floated free, always hovered above the various powers and principalities of the theological kingdom of this world. She seemed to emerge onto the scene with a conspective apprehension of the totality of the Christian tradition (and beyond), and has been using it effortlessly since then. Even today, I would argue that of the four

of them, Tanner's work is the least *individual*, the least imbued with the distinctive tint of her own personality, and the most likely to construct an argument by corralling a disparate hodgepodge of voices into a surprisingly harmonious chorus. Again, a comparison with Aquinas is instructive: like the "Dumb Ox," she is not prone to occupy all the space in a public setting, but lets her work speak for itself, so that even her distinctive insights into the tradition, and her innovations beyond it, are not blustery or noisy.

Now, no one is going to confuse Tanner with Aquinas, but they do share a steady, easy dialectical calm, and a panoptic appreciation of the entire theological scope and theological tradition that few others can manage. Both are profoundly aware of the manifold ways that an argument can have implications for a wide spectrum of theological *topoi*, so that each moment in the argument is made after full and careful consideration of its implications for the theological project as a whole. Both exhibit command of the whole tradition, and convey the feeling that, in speaking on any point, the whole tradition is standing there, silently listening in, so that the statement is subtly if silently inflected by being made in their presence. And finally, both affirm the interrelation between conservation of the tradition and creativity and innovation with(in) it. Indeed, as Tanner has suggested, the acts of conservation and innovation may not be inversely related, even though most theologians in the United States, and beyond, regularly assume that is so. Thus, like Aquinas, Tanner has achieved such a mastery of the tradition that she has gained a deep freedom beyond any of its particular formulations, thinkers, or schools, a freedom so deep that she almost becomes free of the need to be partial, in several senses, to any particular location or locution within it.

In this sense, there is a tension between the manifest distinctive intelligence and power of Tanner's work, and the equally undeniable transparency of her prose, position, and purpose. This it seems to me

is where Tanner is most distinctive, and where we may have the most to learn from her. Her theological work is among the most materially rich and profound available to us today, but also oddly self-effacing; she often frankly acknowledges the availability of multiple legitimate theological approaches, and sketches how any of those logics could work, so long as they recognize a core series of affirmations they must confirm, and a set of dangers they must avoid. That is to say, her work does not call attention to itself, but points "beyond" itself to something else, something larger. I know of no one who has reflected upon this curious fact about her work—curious, at least, for a theologian writing in our deeply self-conscious age. Here I want to suggest that we can learn a great deal from this, both in *what* she is trying to do and *how* she is trying to do it.

These features of Tanner's work reveal something significant about how she conceives the theological task. For her, the professional theological task is a matter of finding resources to help us in our theological interpretations of and responses to life. Academic theology is an ancillary intellectual discipline, a service industry. This is not because she devalues theology; far from it. To the contrary, it is precisely because she thinks it is *fundamentally* important, for *every* believer. As she puts it, "[i]n order to witness to and be a disciple of Jesus, every Christian has to figure out for him or herself what Christianity is all about, what Christianity stands for in the world." This is "an essential demand of everyday Christian living."[5] This is very true: theology is not, nor should it be, essentially the province of virtuosi. It is a fundamental task of all Christians. This view reflects the rather high cognitive expectations that are put on Christians by some fundamental dynamics of the tradition, and that are then redoubled in conditions of modernity. The role of the academic

5. Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xiii.

theologian in this setting is to generate creative resources for ordinary theological use, and to show how to test all such contributions, including his or her own, for doctrinal coherence and theological fruitfulness. What Tanner is doing, and what she imagines academic theology properly to be, is not theology but what we might call *theology-logy*; it is about the different logics of theology, their strengths and weaknesses.

This may sound strangely abstract, reflexive, and formalist, but it derives from deep first-order material theological convictions. Her method is, it seems to me, deeply connected to her vision of God's sovereignty, and flows from two fundamental convictions: *first*, that God is *absolutely free* and unconstrained by the logic of creation; and *second*, that God has *freely committed* Godself to creation as fundamentally manifest in the incarnation of Christ. These convictions, as they play out for Tanner in the shape of human participation in God's plan, first in Christ and then in the Christian community on earth, have profound implications for understanding the theologian's vocation. In fact, all of her work explores the vocation of academic theological reflection, especially as that presents a problem of theological method. In particular, it explores how to understand the work of academic theology in the service of the ongoing life of the church. The latter hangs on her understanding of the work of the church as the special mark of the ongoing presence of God in the world, *and* speaks to some basic convictions she has about the relationship between God and creation, a relationship that realizes some kind of climactic realization in the figure of Christ.

The chapter makes this argument in several steps. First, I try to put before us a brief sketch of the shape of her work as a whole, noting the way it is radically innovative across fields, then wondering whence that innovation comes. Here I want to have the reader wonder, how are these works the work of *one* theological mind?

Then, in the second half, I sketch three thematic threads that span and stabilize the multiple kinds of difference in Tanner's writing: 1) a deep and abiding attention to the breadth of resources available in the history of Christian thought; 2) a fundamental methodological commitment to what I call "theology-logy," that is, conceiving of academic or professional theology as *not* first-order discourse into God (like a steamship of inquiry captained by some theologian, which will carry ordinary Christians like boat passengers), but instead as a second-order analysis of first-order theological discourse; and 3), underlying the other two, a positive vision of God's relation to the world as funding this construal of the theological task, and ensuring its vitality despite—or, more accurately, precisely because of—its remarkable self-effacing qualities.

Tanner's Path

To bring this more fully into view, I want to show that there is in fact a curiosity in her work to be explored, an *explanandum* in need of explanation. I will do that here through a quick summative tour of her major works. This will showcase both her repeatedly groundbreaking innovations in quite diverse areas of theological inquiry, and hopefully also raise the question of the coherence of her various works—whether, that is, they gel into something larger than the sum of their parts.

I think they do, but by way of a "something" that is quite unlike the usual contributions that thinkers make. There is no ultimately "Tannerian" stance on any of these issues—there is only the repeated mobilization of diverse thinkers' insights, from multiple historical and institutional and subtraditional perspectives, to show how theological discourse and practice can be rendered new, diversified and liberated from the idolatrous ossifications in which we sinfully indulge. In

what is this approach rooted? It clearly has different anchors across her career. Different theorists appear and disappear across the pages of her books—Wittgenstein and Geertz early on, then cultural and political theorists, always theologians and philosophers, and so on. Nonetheless, behind these different thinkers always lie some basic convictions about God's freedom as manifest in Christ—claims about God and about creation.

God and Creation in Christian Theology

Her first book, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (1988), explored some basic metaphysical presuppositions of philosophical theology, insisting that our conception of the categories we employed were insufficiently informed by the tradition, and confined within certain bourgeois mid-twentieth century understandings. If we only appreciated those traditional accounts, she argued, we would see that understandings of God and creation need not be constrained within the narrow framework we had been presuming. Most famously, she set forth the basic idea that the tradition repeatedly affirmed the divine's causal "non-contrastative transcendence" vis-à-vis the causal structures of the created order, and explained that it was only because modern assumptions made that vision increasingly difficult to comprehend that we did not realize that multiple theological voices had affirmed this vision throughout history and in the present. This is perhaps a surprisingly apologetic project (especially coming from someone trained at Yale at that time) that primarily "defends" the tradition by showing that no defense of real Christian discourse is needed. Along with the material positions she advanced in this book, it is also crucial for its exposition of the claim that academic theology should be concerned with articulating the "ruled structures of theological

talk and their function."[6] As it offers such formal and regulative guidelines, specialized theological language is "called forth by Christian practice."[7] Furthermore, this stance requires a deep acquaintance with the historical traditions of Christian thought; as she puts it, "[t]he theologian who is to avoid the modern subversion of our rules for discourse must know the theological tradition of which he or she is a part: how traditional theological claims have been used within their discourse contexts."[8]

All of this is part of a larger rehabilitation of classical metaphysical claims of God's transcendence, in which effort Tanner had fellow-laborers in thinkers such as Robert Sokolowski and David Burrell. Furthermore, this recovery was begun at the same time that analytic philosophy was slowly recovering robust metaphysical argument, and in particular just as the field of "Christian philosophy"—informed by figures such as Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Peter van Inwagen—was revving up. Even in this first book, Tanner's point was not that there was *one* particular view of human and divine agency that was right—Thomist, or Augustinian, or another—but rather that several diverse languages were available in which the important distinctions and contrasts between kinds of agency could be drawn. What matters is that the chosen language must help us affirm that the experience of God is fundamentally rooted in *empowerment*, in enabling and not constraining or disabling human agency and activity.

6. Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 10.
7. Ibid., 13.
8. Ibid., 168.

The Politics of God

She followed her first book with a second, topically an apparently quite different one, namely, *The Politics of God* (1992). This book turned to political theology and effectively sketched *in nuce* the lineaments of a post-Schmittian theological view, in which political categories are shown to be always already theologically charged, and theological categories are able to disrupt the political status quo in ways that are profoundly liberatory. This view has more recently gathered support from figures as diverse as Oliver O'Donovan, Catherine Keller, Ted Smith, Luke Bretherton, and myself, though I suspect few of us realized that we were following trails that she had played so large a role in blazing.

Discontinuities abound between the books, but deeper continuities lurk as well. For example, *The Politics of God* looks at the same historical legacy she mined in *God and Creation*, though it uncovers in it a far more complicated legacy. She notes how these practices, which she had previously discovered to be more healthy than much modern discourse, had historically often been used to support "conservative adherence to established political and social relations, willing complicity in social injustice, quiescence before conditions that cry out for change."[9] We cannot help but hear a hint of a confession in her subsequent claim that "[i]f one is a Christian, the abhorrent character of that history will either force one to drop Christianity altogether, or incline one to start afresh as a Christian by tearing down and rebuilding from the bottom up an account of God and the world with different sociopolitical associations."[10] In response, Tanner shows how these doctrines can be mobilized—clearly, *have* been—both to reinforce human hierarchies

9. Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 2.
10. Ibid., 3.

and to undermine them, to cast the mighty from their thrones. She clearly favors the latter, showing how our construals of God can empower humans to become more fully engaged in liberatory political action, disrupting our complacencies and puncturing our pretentions. Once again, God enables agency and power for humans—in this case, precisely by smashing the political idols we have constructed to trap us in certain political formations and formulations.

Theories of Culture

The troubles with the tradition that she acknowledged in *The Politics of God* returned yet again as a major goad for her third book, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (1997). There, she showed how a great deal of contemporary theological discourse is misled by a flawed understanding of the nature of human cultural realities, based on a too-simple understanding of the category of "culture" itself. On the surface, this analysis of the contemporary theological scene was accomplished by the articulation and development of a post-modern conception of culture—or rather, the articulation and exposition of postmodern culturalist critiques of the too-coherent, too-systematic modern conception of culture. That modern conception was rooted in a Romantic understanding of organic localism, which is itself a salutary defense against over-confident universalisms in 18th and 19th century Europe and in the 20th century postcolonial world as well. This understanding of culture, Tanner helped the theological guild understand, is not a natural kind, a structural reality in nature; rather, it is a human interpretation of human phenomena and as such is susceptible to reinterpretation and contestation.

Negatively, she used this analysis to argue, surprisingly, that the postliberal theology with which she had heretofore been identified