

Response

The church and action for the world: a response to Amy Pauw

I am very grateful to Amy Pauw for the careful and forceful way in which she has applied her considerable theological acumen, and the fruits of her long engagement with the church, to an interpretation and cautionary commentary on my book. Her remarks are a gift to me even as they chasten and redirect my efforts to expand the arguments of this book into a larger one. As I mention in an aside at the end of Chapter 3, the give and take of intellectual life, at its best, is an intimation of the community of mutual fulfillment which I believe the gospel calls us to realize everywhere. In writing the book I could only hope that faults in my arguments would be remedied and their good points developed, beyond anything I could achieve alone, by fine theologians such as Pauw taking up those arguments and offering them back to me transformed. This very exchange reflects the way a community of mutual fulfillment need not be community at a remove from disagreement, conflict, and the temptation to hubris among fallible, morally weak individuals (such as myself). In a fallen world of finite creatures, a community of mutual fulfillment often just is in this way a community of argument (of the sort I discuss in *Theories of Culture*) – a community that is agonistic, prone to deep disagreement about matters of shared concern, but a community held together nonetheless by the shared admission of fault and the consequent recognition that the true and the good can be had by anyone only through open engagement with all.

Pauw is quite right that I have more work to do. There is no chapter on the church and questions of church polity remain unanswered. This is, however, more in keeping with the book's overall aims than Pauw gives me credit for. The book does not make the liturgy the model of Christian life and then fail, unaccountably, to follow through on this emphasis on the church. In imitation of pre-modern theologies (such as that of Aquinas), but perhaps not for the same pre-modern reasons, the book contains no chapter on the church because the book's primary concern is with action in the world, with cosmos-wide transformation of the broadest possible socio-economic and political sort. That kind of transformation is what the church is for. It was therefore appropriate, in a book of limited compass, to give much greater attention to the theological shape of such transformation and to the Christian obligation to bring it about, than to the organization of church life in and of itself. Certainly the church should be organized along the lines of a community of mutual fulfillment, especially if it is to have any hope of being

the vanguard of the kingdom, but this is of no independent interest; the church is to have such an organization only because the whole of creation is to have it too.

The institutional structures that are a prerequisite for a community of mutual fulfillment need further attention, as Pauw points out. How is such a community to be realized in practice? What would it look like more concretely? But once again – for the same reasons mentioned – I prefer to discuss this as a much broader issue than that of church polity. For example, in a series of recent lectures on global capitalism that I plan to integrate into the larger book I show how the theological principles laid out in the chapter on the shape of human life can be employed to produce very practical recommendations for institutional reform of international economic regulatory bodies and their policies.

None of this is to discount Pauw's concerns about possible misreadings of my work in the absence of an explicit ecclesiology. I would hate for a conservative polity, insisting, for example, on a fixed and marked distinction between religious leaders and laity, to fill the breach. The popularity of this particular book of mine (relatively speaking!) gives me pause; I too am afraid that the conservative sound of some of the language is being isolated from the unusual company I am making it keep. In the writing I am presently doing to expand the book, I am therefore trying to highlight the feminist intentions behind the work, which are most notable, as the book stands, in my repudiation of most traditional accounts of atonement.¹

I certainly would agree with Pauw about the dangers of exclusion within the church, and of hubris in the church's relations with other religions and with the wider world. These dangers are a good justification for concerted attention to ecclesiology. The need for church reform is, as I think Karl Barth recognized, the primary point behind a theology that focuses on the church. But I think I am already doing quite a bit in the book to head off those dangers; and that, where this opposition remains implicit, it is the logical, fairly short, inference from the rest of what I do say explicitly.

Thus, I would agree that a stress on the importance of sacramental ritual for Christian life tends historically to be found together with hierarchical, top-down forms of church organization, and with a certain privileging of the church in human life. I am not, however, making these aspects of church life as important as Pauw thinks. Baptism and eucharist are mentioned, it is true, as ways in which we are united with Christ and thereby to be transformed according to the shape of Christ's life. But they are mentioned alongside a

¹ See a forthcoming article in the *Anglican Theological Review* on the cross and sacrifice.

number of other ways – alongside faith and prayer, for example, which are neither commonly regarded as sacraments whose exercise some subset of the faithful could monopolize, nor confined to church spaces. I also very deliberately blur the difference between worship and service; unity with Christ is primarily indicated by the eccentric, Godward character of one's acts, and this can and should hold for action in service of others as much as it holds, say, for one's prayer life.

The interpretation I offer of the eucharist, moreover – a banquet provided for us by the trinity – is designed to bring it into line with the principles of divine gift-giving adumbrated in Chapter 3: unconditional giving of universal extent that sets up non-competitive relations among the recipients. Understanding the eucharist in that fashion (and frankly, I do not see how the presentation suggests otherwise, when read as a whole): No one is to be excluded from the Lord's table; distinctions of worthiness are of no relevance for participation, in the sense that all are to come to the table in all their unworthiness in order to be purified and healed of fault and elevated in the good; whatever differences there may be in giftedness are only to be used in the service of overcoming such differences. If the eucharist is in this way a model for church polity, I do not see that Pauw has much grounds for worry.

The privilege of the church is deflated here, but not by attacking the sacramental character of baptism and eucharist: God's grace is genuinely at work there with all the power to effect transformation despite all our failures as Christians to demonstrate as much in our lives. Christian pretension is undercut instead by deflating the worthiness, in and of themselves, of the Christian actors in such rites and by stressing the efficacy of the Holy Spirit here, and wherever it wills. I have therefore tried my best to stress the difference between humans and Christ, and to give the privilege to him (not the church) as our means of access to the fount of goodness he calls Father by the power of the Spirit – Christ's powers are never transferred to Christians as their own property. I have also strongly stressed the universal reach of Christ's work in ways that would not limit Christ's influence to that of the church; there is every reason to think that, on my account, the Holy Spirit works to bind human life to that of Christ beyond the reach of explicitly Christian worship and witness.

Finally, Pauw does not think a community of mutual fulfillment conforms well with the rest of my theology of gift; and here I think she is simply mistaken. Her arguments are basically twofold: that there is nothing specifically theological about the account; and that it fails to reflect the life of Christ by ignoring the existence of sin and conflict. On the first point, I am completely opposed to the way Pauw thinks a community of mutual fulfillment excludes God's working for us in ways that exceed the capacity

of our own efforts. To assume such an either/or is exactly what I mean by a competitive account of divine and human action – if we are acting to serve others, God must not be; the more we act, the less God does. There is also absolutely no reason to think a community of mutual fulfillment is some form of quid pro quo instrumentalism. To the extent the idea of a community of mutual fulfillment summarizes the principles of relationship laid out in Chapter 3, it includes not just the idea of non-competitive relationship – for example, efforts to organize social relationships so that no one benefits at another's expense or has to benefit others at one's own expense – but a principle of unconditional giving. So where is the quid pro quo? My whole account of human community, moreover, is theological in that, as I try to carefully sketch in that chapter, it reflects general principles underlying the entire, multi-staged story of God's efforts to give us the good of God's own trinitarian fullness.

Here Pauw's second, more serious, worry comes in. Despite my efforts to differentiate the way these general principles hold for God and us, Pauw believes I have completely assimilated human relations to divine ones in ways that ignore sin and conflict and that fail to do justice to my own best insights about incorporation into Jesus' own way of living. The apparent inapplicability of a community of mutual fulfillment to a fallen, finite world is something that I am trying to dispel in the work I am presently doing. I am clearly aware in the book of the danger of over-idealizing human capacities when deriving conclusions about proper human relations from theological starting points: that is the very criticism I make of most contemporary treatments of a trinitarian politics.² I do not think that the idea of a community of mutual fulfillment is guilty of such over-idealization in principle. In the essays on global economy previously mentioned, I hope to demonstrate as much by discussing in quite practical and concrete terms the sort of structural changes that accord with such a vision of human life. They are far from utopian.

On the score of Jesus' own way of life, I believe we have a deeper difference of opinion. I would certainly agree that Jesus' life shows us the likely consequences of working for a way of life that would be genuinely dedicated to the good of all – violent opposition and failure. (My Chapter 4 is expressly designed to explore the consequences of this for Christian activism.) I do not, however, agree that a cruciform way of life is what Jesus' mission was all about – that is not the model for human relationships

² This attack on directly modeling human relations on trinitarian ones is developed further in an essay on the trinity forthcoming in the *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh.

that Jesus' own way with others (which I discuss as a ministry of divine benefit) promotes. Nor do I agree that the cross lauds self-sacrifice so as to make that sort of competitive achievement of the good (someone always has to lose) all that we could reasonably expect for human life. Again, I hold a very unusual account of the atonement, though for some of the most traditional reasons imaginable – because the incarnation is the center of my theology in a most thoroughgoing way.

I therefore fear the way Pauw makes the idea of a community of argument a simple complement to a community of gift – a necessary corrective to the latter given the realities of a finite and fallen world. As I suggested in the opening paragraph of my remarks, I do not view a community of argument as a distinct form of life designed to address circumstances of sin and finitude so much as what a community of fulfillment itself is like under circumstances of conflict and sin. Making a community of argument – understood as a community marred fundamentally by sin and conflict – into the necessary corrective to a community of mutual fulfillment seems to me to undercut too quickly the force of a community of mutual fulfillment as an ideal. It thereby confirms our complacency about the sort of world we should be working for as Christians: Some people have to be sacrificed for the good of others; more would be nice but even God can have no more of a plan for us than that. Of course we are likely to fail in our efforts to realize a community of mutual fulfillment: what effort for the good – whatever its goal – isn't likely to fail in a world as wracked by sin as ours is? That is not to say, however, that God hasn't created a world of finite persons with this sort of end for us in mind, and, with the incarnation, found a way beyond the fact of both our sin and finitude to give it to us. If we are called to be ministers of that divine mission through such gifts, let us not use the excuse of sin and finitude to lessen the challenge.

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