

Preface

IS THERE ANY NEED for another (long!) book on theological method, potential readers might query? Yet Christian theologians in our post-Enlightenment context realize we need more than ever to be self-reflective about how to think Christianly and to make our claims, especially to the non-Christian world. In conversation with more or less recent developments in Third Article theology—which begins consciously with the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the Third Article of the Nicene confession—the thesis of this volume is that such a pneumatological starting point provides the needed theological platform to enable both retrieval and renewal of historic Christian faith on the one hand and authentic engagement with the many voices across the contemporary global landscape on the other hand. While the four parts and twelve chapters to follow will elaborate variously on this claim, the book's introductory chapter will delineate more precisely the present ferment of Christian theology, even as the concluding chapter will carefully demonstrate how such a dialogical reappropriation allows for a more faithful expression of Christian commitment in the twenty-first-century context. The latter goal is also defended at substantial length in a companion to this book, *The Missiological Spirit: Christian Mission Theology for the Third Millennium Global Context* (Cascade, 2014), to which those interested are referred.

The chapters to come demonstrate the book's thesis through a series of theological conversations. These chapters have been written over the course of more than fifteen years (from about 1997 through 2012) and all except one have been previously published. Those previously published are being reproduced almost verbatim here, with minimal emendations that are signaled by brackets in the notes (used to indicate changes of mind, rarely, but more often to point to other developments). I have chosen to reprint without revision for three reasons. First, these articles and essays exemplify the dialogical nature of theological thinking needed for the present time, precisely the argument sustained herein. Second, their ordering, which is

more or less chronological according to initial writing and publication, reflects the dynamic nature of theological reflection; while I continue to stand by what I have written, the careful reader will note revisions in how some earlier themes are enunciated in later work, both to clear up misunderstandings and to reassert fundamental commitments. Thirdly, collecting these essays spanning one and a half decades gives me the opportunity to reflect methodologically on my own theological journey, an exercise unfolded in the introduction and conclusion, which have been written expressly for this book.

Each chapter includes acknowledgments (usually in the initial or final footnote) that document my gratitude at the time of writing. Thinking back over the last fifteen-plus years, however, I have to thank again my wife, Alma, for providing me with the space, encouragement, and love to work as a theologian. She has always been my faithful dialogue partner in the most important task of all: living faithfully in the Christian way.

Enoch Charles, my former graduate assistant at Regent University, helped immeasurably in formatting the text according to Cascade guidelines and creating the bibliography, among so many other tasks. Ryan Seow, my current graduate assistant at Fuller Seminary, helped with the indexing. I eagerly anticipate the emergence of their dialogical voices in the theological academy.

Robin Parry and especially Rodney Clapp, my editors at Wipf and Stock and both significant theologians in their own right, saw the value of pulling together this collection of previously published essays and including the new material to indicate my thinking at the present time. I am grateful for their support of this project. The staff at Wipf and Stock has also been professional at every turn, and their contribution to turning these disparate pieces into a unified, perhaps even coherent, whole is to be acknowledged.

This book is dedicated to F. LeRon Shults and Terry Muck. I got to know LeRon back in the fall of 1999 when I ended up at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, fairly fresh out of graduate school. I was in the undergraduate theology department at the college and he was working graduate students at the seminary, and we hit it off right away. He had just published his book *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Eerdmans, 1999), and I had just finished my dissertation and was already thinking about my second book, which turned out to be on theological method. We met regularly for lunch for the next six years, talked a lot of theology, and spurred each other on before we parted ways (me to Regent University in Virginia, and LeRon to University of Agder in Norway—literally an ocean apart).

Terry Muck has been a model evangelical scholar, missiologist, and theologian who I have worked with over the years, the last five of which have been primarily in the context of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. Terry has expertly navigated the terrain where evangelicalism and Buddhist studies have converged, exemplifying on the one hand how an evangelical can be a respected Buddhologist and on the other hand how Buddhological expertise can deepen evangelical faith. His life and work reflect the kind of Christian commitment, intellectual humility, academic inquiry, and relational hospitality so needed in the twenty-first century. Surely neither scholar will agree with everything to come. But those who appreciate the *oeuvre* of LeRon and Terry will be in a better position to understand why *The Dialogical Spirit* is dedicated to them and perhaps also see a need for a book such as this, even if LeRon's and Terry's versions would still differ from mine.

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