A Book Worth Discussing

A Reply to Dennis Bielfeldt

"The Freedom of the Theological Word: Andrea Vestrucci's *Theology As Freedom* and the Emergence of a Nova Lingua"
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ABSTRACT: This reply to Dennis Bielfeldt's review clarifies the central claim in Andrea Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom*: Luther's *De servo arbitrio* is not simply a doctrinal intervention about human freedom and agency but a performative reconfiguration of the conditions under which theological language can speak meaningfully. Responding to Bielfeldt's concern that "formal freedom" risks becoming a purely structural account that leaves an "ontological absence," Vestrucci argues that "formal" does not mean merely linguistic; it names the theological intelligibility of speech whose conditions are judged and re-founded by the unconditional event of revelation. Revelation functions as an "absolute beginning" that is *already* an act and cannot be domesticated by inherited modal or teleological frameworks of freedom. The reply situates formal analysis as derivative of the revelatory event and the status of belief, and agrees with Bielfeldt that pneumatology is the decisive bridge that unites language and being without treating ontology as an external tribunal or as an addition appended after a linguistic prolegomenon. The reply concludes by framing Bielfeldt's critique as a productive agenda: to show more explicitly how theology's formal freedom and participatory truth belong together under the priority of divine revelation.

I am grateful to Dennis Bielfeldt for reading *Theology as Freedom* with such care and for presenting its argument with a precision that is itself a form of interpretation. In particular, I appreciate his effort to articulate the book's basic wager: Luther's *De servo arbitrio* is not merely a doctrinal statement about agency but a *performative* displacement of the *conditions* under which theology can speak at all. In other somewhat metaphorical worlds, I would say that Dr. Bielfeldt's review fully encapsulated my thesis that theology is freedom as an alteration of the logical space of human language.

A review proves generous when it also presses relevant and pertinent questions. Bielfeldt's review is no exception as it raises a question that lies at the core of my book, one that is hard to evade once one speaks, as I do, of "formal freedom": *Can theology's freedom endure without ontology?* If the contact with divine revelation is treated primarily as the initiation of a transformation of logical priorities, the worry is that divine action may appear as a "purely structural operator," leaving a kind of "ontological absence"—a sort of grammar without a speaker, a disembodied voice, which is precisely what divine revelation in and as the Word that is Jesus Christ is not! I welcome this question because it clarifies where the argument of my book *Theology as Freedom* is deliberately focused and where it invites continuation.

1. "Formal" Does Not Mean "Merely Linguistic"

My intention was never to describe revelation as *only* a change in logical structure nor to let divine speech "recede" behind grammatical or semantic effects. Rather, the "formal" aspect names a specific claim about theological *intelligibility*. Hence, the focus is on theology and its language, not *directly* on God's revelation. As such, the book somehow follows implicitly Luther's dictum to focus on an indirect way of doing theology, a way that begins from the *posteriora Dei*—the "back."

The main thesis of the book is that divine revelation, i.e., the incarnation of the Word, is not one item that sits *within* a prior field of conditions, specifically those conditions that make our speech meaningful. On the contrary, revelation is *eccentric* to these conditions because such conditions could not initiate divine revelation by themselves. Hence, revelation is an eccentric *center* from which those conditions are recognized as *limited*. In the context of *De servo arbitrio*, this limitation concerns the conditions of formulating meaningful statements about freedom.

This is why, in the conclusion, I insist on the asymmetry between conceptual specificity and formal specificity of theology. If the specificity of theology were merely conceptual, then divine revelation as the subject matter of theology would depend on the conditions of these concepts. On the other hand, if we are keen to acknowledge that divine revelation does not depend on human conditions, the specificity of theology is the modification of these conditions.

2. Revelation as "Absolute Beginning" Is Already a Claim about Act

Bielfeldt is right to insist that "divine speech … is act," and it is crucial to see that the book's formal point is meant to protect precisely this irreducibility of divine act. In the conclusion, I speak of theology's foundation as a "message," a "string of information" conditioned by nothing—it is "not only a beginning; it is the absolute beginning."

This is an attempt to say that revelation is not derivable from nor measurable by the frameworks that normally authorize human discourse. Its "mere existence… is already the evidence of the limitation of any possible condition." Hence, "formal" here is not a reduction of the reality of revelation to syntax; it is a way of saying

that theology's *conditions of meaningful speech* are themselves judged, displaced, and re-founded by revelation's unconditionality. Again, the "formal" focus is on the language of theology, not on divine speech as divine act.

Put differently, my formalism is not meant to *replace* divine agency with structure but is meant to articulate why divine agency cannot be captured by the modal, deontic, or teleological idioms that pretend to domesticate a notion of human freedom *even* in light of divine revelation. When I say that theology is "language beginning (or beginning again) from divine revelation," the point is that language can only confess its own limitation theologically—i.e., under the priority of divine *verbum* over human *verbum*.

3. Truth, Reference, and "What Formal Analysis Cannot by Itself Supply"

At the same time, Bielfeldt identifies a genuine methodological tension. A "formal reconstruction" can clarify the *conditions* under which theological statements become meaningful (or cease to be meaningful from the standpoint of inherited logics), but it does not automatically yield a worked-out account of how theological language is *true*—i.e., how *reference* and *reality* belong together. In his terms, "freedom of language is not yet freedom for truth," and the *nova lingua* must not become a self-enclosed "linguistic revolution."

I take this less as a refutation than as a map of tasks. The book's aim is focused to show with and in Luther that theology is not "a conceptual system" but "the effort of formal reconstruction of language's own system-breaking."

As such, one can grant that formal reconstruction, by itself, does not yet provide what Bielfeldt calls an "ontological ground," especially if the question is posed in terms of truth-makers or participatory realism. However, this formal reconstruction is ontologically grounded in the event of divine revelation, which is one with the divine act of *illumination* about this event, i.e., the gracious gift of believing. Without the fact of revelation and the status of believer, no revelation-based formal reconstruction of language would be possible, and thusly no theological language would be available.

4. Pneumatology as Bridge—without Undoing the Formal Point

This is why I agree with Bielfeldt's suggestion that "the pneumatological dimension is decisive" and that "the Spirit … unites language and being." It is precisely the emphasis on the action of the Spirit as ontological proximity of revelation to the speaking human to offer a way to speak of the unity of formal modification and ontological efficacy without collapsing one into the other.

I would put the prospective convergence in these terms: if revelation is "the absolute beginning," then theology is not an autonomous formal reconstruction but is, rather, a derivative reconstruction. Theology is the expression of the *reality* of believing in divine revelation: as such, it is the expression of the servitude under

God. Saying "*servum arbitrium*" is one with acting out this servitude on the level of language. In sum, theology's freedom is, as the review nicely says, the "freedom of obedience" towards revelation.

That reception, again, is not an abstract transfer of rules; it is the event in which God addresses, constitutes, and thereby re-situates the speaker. If pneumatology names the divine agency by which the Word is present and effective in and as address, then pneumatology can indeed serve as a bridge between (a) the formal claim that revelation re-founds the conditions of meaningful theological discourse and (b) the realist claim that divine speech effects realities outside discourse.

My only caution is that this bridge should not be construed as "adding ontology" *after* a merely linguistic "prolegomenon," as if revelation first produced a free grammar and only later received reality. Rather, the book's formal thesis intends to show why the *question of ontology itself* must be posed *under* revelation's priority—i.e., why "ontology" cannot function as an external tribunal before which revelation must justify itself. Theology speaks *from* an alternative that is already there—divine revelation—and this "alternative" concerns the limitation of every possible metalinguistic condition in light of revelation, including the conditions of ontological speech.

5. Conclusion

I therefore receive Bielfeldt's challenge as an invitation to further work rather than as an objection that defeats the project. If *Theology as Freedom* clarifies how revelation reorganizes theology's logical space, then a next step—one that Bielfeldt's own model-theoretic realism outlines with precision and energy—would be to show more explicitly how this formal reorganization is inseparable from the divine act that makes it possible and true. I am thankful for the review because it identifies with precision a central point that future discussions should not avoid: how to hold together theology's formal freedom and theology's participatory truth without letting either term cancel the other.

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