

PAUL J. GRIFFITHS

RESPONSE TO JUDITH GRUBER

I am grateful to Professor Gruber for her thoughtful and profound response to my hasty and superficial essay. She raises large questions, a full discussion of which would require volumes. I will make brief comments only on a few points.

First, I resist the claim that the position I take is violent. It is only so by an analogical extension of the word “violence” so stretched that we arrive at equivocity. What I advocate is close and loving reading by Christian theologians of alien works. Such an activity is to real violence as the kiss is to the lynching. Clarity of thought and attention to language should prevent such accusations.

Second, it seems to me that the theology of revelation and the ecclesiology I suggest implies not a logic of possession, as she claims, but rather one of being possessed. When the gift given is possessed it ceases to be gift; when the gift given is received as gift, it is returned, ecstatically, to the giver. Gruber quotes Derrida on the gift, as an authority, it seems; I suggest that she attend to the work of Jean-Luc Marion on this subject, Derrida’s student, who understands better than he how to think about the gift. For Christians, the essential gift is of life; for Derrida, the only genuine gift is that of death. The difference is worth more thought than Gruber appears to have given to the topic.

Third, it seems to me that most of what Gruber says about the church’s theological task is vitiated by lack of attention to the difference between claims in the order of being and those in the orders of knowing and discovery. Contingency belongs to the latter orders; they are contingent, though in a more subtle sense than Gruber allows: vide Newman on the development of doctrine. But it is essential to, properly constitutive of, the grammar of Christian discourse to claim that what it is about is exactly non-contingent, and that is because it is about the *sanctissima trinitas*, the *trinitas quae deus est*, to borrow Augustine’s formulation, which is beyond contingency. The Lord’s self-revelation is not, as she claims it is, a process of interpretation all the way down and all the way up: that is an instance of the confusion I mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph.

Fourth, Gruber thinks that “finding Jesus apart from the christological formulations of the church is historically impossible.” Much rests on the penultimate word in that sentence; on some construals of it, the sentence is true. But if she means that Jesus cannot be found at all independently of the church’s contin-

gent christological formulations (and her paper as a whole suggests that this is the right view), then it is false. I find Jesus before my eyes and on my tongue several times a week. He is there, before me, and within me, really and directly. What I do when I receive him thus is deeply different from what I do when I confess the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Symbol. Gruber's analysis of presence-as-absence is stuck in the conceptual and linguistic order, which is not the only one. She appears not to be serious about the flesh; this is evident in her footnote 5, which is an uneasy and foot-shuffling evasion.

And lastly, on boundaries. I agree with Gruber (and I wrote this in my brief piece) that it is not always easy to tell what is inside and what is outside. That difficulty is a feature of the human epistemic condition. But saying this implies nothing at all as to whether there is a clear answer to the question of what is inside and what is outside. Again, clarity about the differences that separate the order of being from the order of knowing would show this with abundant precision. In addition to this, the drawing of boundaries, with what clarity we can muster, is intrinsic to Catholicity: the canon of Scripture has boundaries, and it is theologically essential that it should; the community of those who may properly receive Christ's body and blood at celebrations of the eucharist has boundaries, and it is theologically essential that it should. More instances would surely be otiose? It is only within these boundaries, known imperfectly but nevertheless an essential feature of the fabric of the Christian life, that the vocation of the Catholic theologian can be practiced. It is also only within these boundaries that the otherness of alien texts can be taken with the intellectual seriousness it deserves. Positions such as Gruber's, I am almost tempted to claim, make serious theological work impossible because they operate within a frame of dogmatic homogeneity that is itself an unrecognized outflow of the social and economic structures of late capitalism; those structures require the homogeneity of deferral and the concomitant abolition of difference, as does Gruber's paper. But I will resist the temptation and leave that thought at the level of mention rather than that of use.