

God—The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era. Second edition. By Ted Peters. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000, xviii + 403 pp., \$25.00 paper.

The 1992 release of *God—The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era* by Ted Peters was met with great fanfare. Luminaries such as George Lindbeck, James McClendon, and Philip Hefner hailed it as the first consciously postmodern systematic theology in mostly glowing terms. The late Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary professor John Newport commended the book as a guide for conservative Christians who needed help in entering the postmodern world of holism and postcritical reconstruction. The release of a second edition, with a slightly changed subtitle, is therefore something that many contemporary systematic theologians will note with interest.

Upon examination one finds both that there are no new chapters and that none of the original chapters has been deleted. The second edition is a scant 19 pages longer than its predecessor. Furthermore, Peters's theology retains its proleptic focus. So what *is* different between the original and the second edition? In form, not much has changed—but in content, quite a bit has. Two changes are significant. First, Peters is now fully aware that there are two competing types of postmodernism—the holistic and the deconstructive. His original work was a systematic theology for a (holistic) postmodern era. His new offering takes stock of deconstruction, and thus understands postmodernism differently, and as a result offers a more thorough discussion of the impact of arising postmodern consciousness on Christian theology. That his allegiance lies with *holistic* postmodernism, rather than its overly critical cousin, becomes clear when he writes:

On one point, however, I find I must simply depart from deconstructionist postmodernism, namely, I pursue construction of a universal vision of reality. I work with certain assumptions: theology seeks to be rooted in truth. For the truth to be truth, it must be more than the subjective projection of an individual from his or her social location; it must be rooted in objective reality as well as subjective perspective. This means, finally, that the truth must be one, and it must be encompassing. Otherwise, it is less than the truth (xvi).

The second difference is Peters's deeper reflection upon, and appropriation of, feminist theological language, symbols, and thought. This is seen in his treatment of the person and work of Christ. To his earlier tripartite structure of Prophet, Priest, and King, he adds a fourth category, namely, "Jesus, Wisdom Incarnate" (192-93). Yet Peters rejects the (fairly common feminist) approach of "adding" feminine symbols (modeled upon feminine experience) to parallel (or replace) the traditional masculine symbols, preferring instead to "bring to light previously ignored biblical symbols" (193). This is consistent with his belief that the biblical symbols must be the norm for Christian theology. After considering the other alternative he boldly declares:

If the task of theology is not conceived as interpreting scripture—if we conceive of theology as beginning with human experience and imagination independent from scripture—then we have no way of knowing whether or not we are speaking about the God of Israel who raised Jesus from the dead and fired the faith of the first Christians. Hence, I believe Christian theology must remain hermeneutical theology—that is, remain rooted in the task of interpreting the originary biblical symbols (46).

There are many things to like about this book. The prose is very good. The method is clearly stated and, for the most part, followed. Peters insists that systematic theology must be hermeneutical—i.e., it must be based upon a proper interpretation of the biblical symbols, which are the criterial norm for Christian theology (55-67). It is well organized. Furthermore, he moves on from biblical exegesis and systematic construction to discuss ethics and what is surely one of the most important theological issues of our day, the status of other world religions. Peters rightly sees John Hick's pluralism for what it is, namely, one more confessional position within a plurality of positions concerning salvation, and not a precondition that all must accept in order for dialogue to take place (366). Yet there are significant things that this reviewer finds troubling. Two are worth mentioning. The first is that his doctrine of Scripture, while consistently Lutheran (the tradition within which Peters stands), leaves at least one basic question unresolved. Peters notes that the early church did not use inspiration as a criterion for canonicity, preferring instead to determine canonicity upon the recognition of trustworthiness. Unfortunately, other factors that contributed to a book being recognized as canonical are entirely overlooked. Furthermore, and more significantly, Peters mistakes epistemology for ontology. He discusses the process of canonical recognition (epistemology), but apparently fails to grasp that those who argue for plenary verbal inspiration are concerned with what Scripture *is* (ontology). In other words, should one accept that the primary criterion for canonicity was trustworthiness, one is still faced with the question, Why is this book trustworthy? A second concern is that after rejecting Hick's pluralism, Peters hypothesizes a type of universalism, based upon an optimistic interpretation of *sola gratia*, that goes beyond even Karl Barth's position. One significant problem with his proposal (not a conclusion) is that in order to propose it, he simply notes that there seem to be three irreconcilable types of biblical themes on this issue (366-68). Having said this, he abandons hermeneutics and turns instead to conjecture. While this may soothe one's sensibilities, it is a rejection of his position that systematic theology must be hermeneutical.

God—The World's Future is an above average systematic theology by a respected theologian. It should prove useful as a parallel, but not primary, text in Southern Baptist systematic theology classes, or as a text for an elective in theological method or eschatology. Its use will likely depend upon one's position on Scripture, feminine imagery, and the question of world religions.

Robert B. Stewart
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary