Introduction

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This book is a collection of edited interviews that took place on various occasions between Brian Brock and several different interviewers. Though the interview can seem lightweight when placed alongside the peer-reviewed article, the research monograph, or the book chapter, it has unique advantages over other genres: the explicit presence of several voices critically interacting; the unexpected twists in argument, flow, and topic; and the immediacy it allows into the speakers' personalities and thought processes. While such generalities are true, and also true of the following chapters, they don't yet express why I find *these* interviews so worthy of consideration.

While studying theology at the University of Aberdeen, I came to know Brian primarily through conversations in departmental seminars, breakfasts after morning prayer, and late nights at St. Machar or the Bobbin. As a completely partial observer, then, what I like most about these interviews are the reminders they offer me of Brian's ability to push one to think harder, to think creatively, and above all to think concretely. Editing this volume also gives me an opportunity to make good on Brian's having introduced me to my favorite question in contemporary jurisprudence: who, exactly, owns the moon?

In order to unpack and anticipate some of the ideas found within the interviews, we could do worse than spend time with one of Brian's heroes: Martin Luther. In his 1531 "Small Catechism," Luther explains the first article of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Creator," in this way:

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> I believe God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul; eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock and all property—along with all necessities and nourishment for this body and life.[1]

Notice that for Luther confessing that "God is Creator" entails discussing everyday things like houses, fields, animals, and ears. We are not offered cosmological observations or metaphysical descriptions of God's attributes, but instead a list of things one can find around the house. Notice also that Luther's list includes examples pulled from nature (body, eyes, limbs, children), but also examples from the world of culture and production (shoes, clothing, fields). We could even go so far to say that the examples from culture are also examples of technology, for each requires certain tools, shared and taught practices, and resources dedicated to producing them. Finally, notice also how this explanation of a creedal confession seems on the verge of bursting into praise and thanksgiving for all of the mundane gifts of God. Indeed, how could one confess and understand that God is Creator without experiencing the temptation of offering up praise?

We can find a similar type of reasoning in Luther's "Large Catechism" when he develops the meaning of "give us our daily bread" from the Lord's Prayer:

> God wishes to show us how he cares for us in all our needs and faithfully provides for our daily sustenance. Although he gives and proves these blessings bountifully, even to the godless and rogues, yet he wishes us to ask for them so that we may realize that we have received them from his hand and may recognize in them his fatherly goodness towards us. When he withdraws his hand, nothing can prosper or last for any length of time, as indeed we see and experience every day. How much trouble there is in the world simply on account of false coinage, yes, on account of daily exploitation and usury in public business, commerce, and labor on the part of those who wantonly oppress the poor and deprive them of their daily bread![2]

1 Luther, "Small Catechism," 354.

2 Luther, "Large Catechism," 451–52.

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Notice again how quickly Luther moves from the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray, to God's continual providing for his creatures, and finally to matters of finance, labor, and commerce.

Although they differ in content, both quotations share a common trajectory and ease. As for their common movement, each begins with questions fit for Sunday school and next leaps into talk of food production and distribution, the economic reverberations and motivations for counterfeit currency, the evils of exorbitant interest rates, and the exploitation of workers. In each Luther is pushed into the world of economics in the course of answering ostensibly theological questions about the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. He even identifies "God's withdrawing his hand" with a rise in these unjust economic practices. Grace, here, is not divorced from material, economic matters, and Luther in fact views the whole realm of activity dedicated to providing for one's household, or *oeconomia*, with one of the primary ways in which God provides for and blesses his creatures. While the trajectory of the quotations may seem counter-intuitive at first, we could readily substitute the biblical passage or creedal material under consideration and imagine exploring how this would reveal aspects of our own contexts. How might this Luther explain what "release to the captives" means in an age when mass incarceration has become an out-sourced, for-profit business activity? How might this Luther interpret the commandment and promise of Sabbath rest in an age of labor compounds like Foxconn?

As for their ease of movement, each quotation smoothly shifts between the vastly different realms of theology, ethics, pastoral care, and everyday matters. Luther seems blissfully unaware of our sharp divisions between Christian confessions and the material world, or between theology, ethics, and exegesis. Part of this ease is due to the fact that these quotations come from catechetical materials, and that pastors and bishops are often forced to unite what theologians and ethicists are trained to separate. It would not be difficult to find comparable passages in Augustine's *City of God* or Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* that run roughshod over our customary disciplinary boundaries. Here again I think it is no accident that these two bishops/theologians from the past saw little to no difference between theology, biblical exegesis, and dealing with everyday pastoral matters.

There is, of course, no possibility of merely returning to the fourth or sixteenth century. One consolation of the Lord's setting an angel with a flaming sword at the entrance of the Garden from which Adam and Eve had been evicted is that this same angel bars Christians from yearning for a

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past Golden Age to which we could hope to return. For Christianity, then, nostalgia for past times, with their alleged simplicity and purity, involves looking in the wrong direction. These are the times and habitations appointed to us and so these are the fields in which we must sow, toil, and reap. This still doesn't mean, however, that Augustine, Athanasius, or Luther, in their very ignorance of our disciplinary divisions, can't help illuminate the intellectual habits, fears, and prides of our own age.

Lamenting the present divisions of theology and ethics, Scripture and ethics, or theology and the political is a common enough gesture amongst contemporary theologians. While the typical response to these divisions is to offer a "theory" or "method" for relating disparate fields of inquiry, I take it that Brian's response is actually to perform the overcoming of these disciplinary divides, and to do so in various ways. One of the ways is to look at past theologians and notice how they regularly transgress our divides between doxology, theology, ethics, and exegesis (as we have attempted above). Yet another potential way of circumventing these divides and creating new trajectories of inquiry is by reconfiguring our questions and presuppositions (as we will attempt below).

What happens in theology and ethics, for instance, when Scripture is understood not as a convenient catalogue of interesting facts about God, but as a disclosure of the very world around me and my place within this world? What if Scripture provides not a suspect and politicized historical record of the inner turmoil of an Ancient Near Eastern religion, but is the address and invitation of God? A common temptation when discussing Scripture is to assume that revelation is solely about God, all the while assuming that the world, those around me, and my very own self are simply self-evident. But what I understand Brian to be asking us to consider is that part and parcel of receiving Scripture as revelation is to become alert to how it opens up to us the world as creation and myself as one creature alongside and within this host of other creatures created and loved by God. Seen in this light, Scripture all of a sudden becomes an unruly mixtape of songs, poems, laments, and stories within the history between God and God's creatures.

We might also see the church as the community for whom Scripture is such a disclosure of God, the world, and ourselves. It can be the revelation of God and creation inasmuch as the same God who wrestled with Jacob and Paul still wrestles with us today. Through its promises, commands, and histories Scripture is the address of God to his people and through its

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stories of praise, of grief, of losing and finding, it teaches us how to address God in return. Stated somewhat more abstractly, we might say that thinking about Scripture and the church, and their interrelationship, best takes place within a wider account of God's dealings with his creatures. Such a lesson can be learned from Barth, or from Luther and his account of the church, the *ecclesia*, as one form of God's care for his creatures.

Within these interviews Brian interacts some with one of the richer contemporary accounts of Scripture, exegesis, and the church offered by the so-called "communitarians." The "communitarians," to use the standard and yet clumsy label, names that group of thinkers who not only think that communities and churches are important (which they are), but who also insist upon a premier place for the church in Christian understandings of theology, exegesis, and ethics. In terms of method and procedure, we might say that communitarians are those who assume that ecclesiology or sociology must act as a kind of "first philosophy," as an intellectual foundation upon which all else is built. Under this category we could include such strange bedfellows as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Stanley Hauerwas, and Leonardo Boff, all of whom are thinkers and people I deeply admire (and with Brian we might get two out of three). Yet one of the persistent tendencies of beginning with the church is that the church also ends up occupying the middle and the end. This is a polemical way of stating the matter, but I think it's illuminating of a certain tendency as well. The response is not that the church is unimportant or unnecessary, but to emphasize how God uses Scripture precisely to bring the church out of itself and into the world, to instruct the church to look elsewhere than itself for its hopes, worries, and guidance. While this vision of Scripture and the church is offered as a kind of indirect criticism of the communitarians, it is not offered in the spirit of any deep antagonism, but as a kind of friendly "pushing," like asking a running partner to do "just one more lap."

We could also imagine what happens when discussions of providence do not directly fasten upon how we should relate different orders of causes or upon how one might respond to genuinely pastoral concerns about evil, suffering, and the efficacy of prayer. Theology and ethics will eventually have to address such concerns, but we could, for a moment, take a cue from Luther and envision God's sustaining of creation within all the natural and cultural processes upon which we as individuals and as communities are dependent. So instead of speaking of primary and secondary causes or radical evil, we might try to speak of God's providence within

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the contemporary world of monoculture, genetically modified food, and reproductive technology.

This trajectory and ease of movement between matters of Christian doctrine and matters of human interaction and technology hopefully seem less strange by now. For once we begin to name and praise the specifics of God's care for his creatures—food, clothing, water, shelter—we are, just like Luther, led into the realm of material artifacts and thus of technology. It is no exaggeration to say that human life, ever since the first Oldowan stone tool kits, has always been intertwined with technology in the form of learned crafts, the manufacturing of tools and weapons, the organization of the natural world, and the utilization of nature's recurring processes. Human existence and technology are in fact so deeply intertwined that when we ask what it is that preserves, sustains, and saves human life, it seems that technology is more than ready to fill that role. No less than the gospel, then, technology offers its own promises. While technology can certainly modify, recombine, and harness what it finds in ever more dizzying ways, it cannot create in any profound sense of the word.

These remarks are primarily intended to show the deep and natural affinity between doctrines of providence and discussions of technology, and are not meant as any type of blanket criticism of it. Many of us have loved ones whose very existence is predicated upon medical technology, and all of us depend upon technologies of agriculture and water purification. There are, then, no simple or obvious answers to the questions surrounding technology. But theology can offer the world insights into how technology views and forms us as creatures, and how quickly it can assume the mantle of creator and redeemer.

Just as God is present and at work in the mundane matters of providing food for his creatures and hope and consolation for his people, we might also wonder what happens when we view God as present and at work in the messy affairs of human interaction and life together. Jesus does not send his disciples out into a godforsaken wasteland, but out and into his own world, the world of his Father and Spirit. Just as we depend upon agriculture for our daily bread, on the church for learning how to sing praises to God, so too do we depend on a myriad of institutions, organizations, and structures for the goods of peace, safety, and sustenance. Here too, within the realm of life together, God is at work preserving and blessing his creatures, even "the godless and the rogues."

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These are hard words to speak and hear, for it is precisely the institutions that shape our life together that seem most corrupt, liable to abuse, and impervious to our hopes and pleas (and perhaps similar words about economics and the church are just as hard). Instead of siding with Luther and his account of politics, or *politia*, as yet another aspect of God's care for his creatures, we might side with the Luther, or with the priest turned heretic in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*, who says that the history of the world, with all its violent struggle, *Realpolitik*, and perpetual subjection of the weak by the powerful, is actually the visible manifestation of God's wrath against sin. Perhaps, then, these are words that can be said and heard only in faith, and like Luther grab the bull by both horns. How, then, can Christians think of mission and political witness within a world that we know belongs to God and yet seems so controlled by the demonic?

Such a context makes all the more provocative Brian's turn to the world of gardening to grasp this dynamic. Within this image the Great Commission sends disciples out into God's garden, his vineyard. Within this garden we do not create the soil, the water, the sun, or the seeds. We till the soil, plant the seeds at the right time and depth, ensure that the level of sunlight and water is appropriate for the plants, and patiently wait on a myriad of forces beyond our control. This is a seductive vision of Christian witness in the world, but once again we might think that the world of politics hardly seems like a garden, and our politicians, interest groups, and violent neighbors hardly seem like roses, daffodils, and tulips. But they do depend on basic aspects of human communication, like trust, that cannot be "made," and that can be courted and encouraged, but are rarely the focus of our discussions of politics and political ethics. The metaphor risks descending into ideology if it is mistaken for an alluring picture of what is a harsh and dark reality.

Despite such justified reservations, I still prefer this account of mission and politics to the other stock-in-trade images of "culture-shapers," "Christian leaders," or even "Jesus radicals" (all rosy-eyed and ideological in their own ways). The power of the metaphor is its ability to admit that God is always and already at work; to show how being receptive and patient isn't the same as being passive and inert; and its sense that Christians should nurture life and growth wherever it is found. Christians can encourage these common and personal goods, and so attempt to be good and honest neighbors, by using their own questions, commitments, and practices. What I find refreshing about the discussion within these interviews is the

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thought that the goods to which Christians witness could potentially be perceived as beneficial and valuable to everyone, even on their own terms.

We have already invoked two of Brian's theological influences, Luther and Augustine, but the reader should note that these are not your parents' Luther and Augustine. Traditionally, many theologians and ethicists looked to Luther's doctrine of the "two kingdoms," the split between the spiritual and the secular realms, as the most promising of Luther's potential contributions to contemporary thought. By contrast, what Brian finds helpful is Luther's account of God and humanity in his late *Genesis Lectures*, as well as the fluidity and sweeping nature of his account of the "three estates"—economy, the church, and the political—as different forms of God's care for his creatures. As for Augustine, Brian does not focus on the customary resource of Augustine's gritty and rather weary "realism" regarding the ability to enact changes in the social realm, but instead turns to Augustine the exegete, and in particular the exegete of the Psalms. The two other main theological influences, Bonhoeffer and Barth, are once again somewhat different. Brian draws less on Bonhoeffer as a prophet of secularization, and more on Bonhoeffer as interpreter of the Psalms and Genesis. Likewise, the Barth that appears is less the dialectical and neo-orthodox doctrinalist, and more the Barth of the *Ethics* and *The Christian Life*.

In addition to these theologians, a company of various philosophers step onto the stage as well. Thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Michel Serres all make an appearance, and here again Brian's interactions with their thought (and others) differ from some customary readings of these figures. These philosophers do not serve as occasions for apologetics or spiritual triumphalism in which we can demonstrate the superiority of Christianity. They also do not serve as authorities who must be obeyed. Nor do they become amusing distractions from doing theology and ethics. Rather the sensibility at work here is that nature, history, and culture are vast and complex realities in constant motion, and that those who help to illuminate and uncover these realities are worthy of our attention.

Some final words about the chapters themselves are in order. The first two chapters present an exchange between Brian and two academics working in the university (Herman Paul and Bart Wallet) and thus the densest of the collection. Chapter 1 explores some of the issues raised above regarding the relationship between theology, ethics, and exegesis (focusing on Brian's book *Singing the Ethos of God*), while chapter 2 focuses on how Christians

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might think about, and at times resist, technology (dealing here with Brian's *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*). Chapters 3 through 8 each begins with a set question, and the topics under discussion shift as the exchange unfolds. These later exchanges with graduate student Jacqueline Lee Hall Broen are more conversational in tone, and make regular reference to local issues (in Aberdeen and St. Andrews, Scotland) that, when necessary, are given some context in the footnotes. In particular, chapter 3 deals with issues of environmentalism and teaching theology within a public university within a modern nation-state. Chapter 4 opens with a discussion of the politics and problems surrounding energy production and use, then goes into hyper-mobility (the main reason for this production and use), and ends by talking about economy, once again understood as how we provide for and sustain human life. Chapter 5 takes up different forms of Christian community, and shades into a discussion of good works and the dangers of self-promotion, and ends by considering how listening to and caring for others can claim and remake us in unpredictable ways. Chapter 6 begins with Christian higher education, shifts into how such an education could impact local urban planning, and finishes with a discussion of how we might understand heaven, hell, and the end times today. Chapter 7 discusses ways medicine and agriculture are dependent upon forces beyond our control, an observation that opens up to questions of political control, consensus-building, and violence. Chapter 8 handles the place of theology within the university, the use of paranoia within politics and theology, and the importance of being attentive to reality. Many of the chapters are self-contained units, so readers are encouraged to enter the book by beginning with the chapters that most interest them.

The issues covered in the various chapters are certainly diverse. Part of their coherence is found in the recurrence of a set of questions, intellectual moves, and theological themes that are woven into the different parts of the conversations. Their greater coherence, however, is that each seeks to express the polarity given in the title of this work: *Captive to Christ, Open to the World*. At a more general level, the couplet of (1) being captive or bound, with (2) being open or free, challenges the usual idea of freedom as freedom from obligation, influence, and necessity. Ever since Hegel there have been a host of philosophies and ethics that have interrogated this contrast. These accounts have shown how the very real situations in which freedom and constraint are opposed can easily mislead us into thinking that all our duties, relationships, histories, and limitations are just so many

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burdens and obstacles that prevent us from being truly free, rather than the presuppositions and fields of our freedom.

That being said, the emphasis in the interviews lies in depicting how being captivated by Christ is to be opened to the world. Here the precedents stretch far back: to Luther, Augustine, and Paul. The uniting theme of the interviews is that being captive to Jesus Christ, bound to Scripture, and placed within the church means being made free to receive the world inasmuch as we are placed outside of ourselves, our fantasies and interests, and our communal enclaves. There should, then, be a similar movement in our talk of God in Christ in the world (theology), of Scripture (exegesis), and the worship and practices of the church (ethics). Within the language of theology, we might see this as a riff on Christ's "sending" of his people, with the added improvisation that there is also a "calling forth," inasmuch as Christ meets us in his world, and a "dragging," inasmuch as sin names both the activities and inertia that we use to avoid the complexities and messiness of being a creature in God's good creation. Or we might say that our justification, Christ grabbing us away from ourselves, is the premise of our sanctification, being opened up, emplaced, and given the desire to perceive and receive more of what is already present to us. This captivity means discovering the place we already inhabit and the doors in it that lead outward into other places and other creaturely lives. So we are captured by God as God opens us up to his own presence in and under creatures—which crucifies and resurrects our self-referential and so idolatrous designs on other creatures.

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