Response to Jan Olav Henriksen, onderzoeksgroep Beliefs, PThU, 19 september 2016

First of all I want to express my appreciation for your book *Life, Love & Hope* which is a very rich and thought-provoking book. In this book a lot of literature, many authors and a variety of perspectives are brought together. In an admirable way you refer to many different theologians like Pannenberg, Dalferth, Welker, Bultmann, Caputo, Tillich , Marion and others. This makes your book very fruitful, but also a bit demanding. It will be obvious that I cannot fully meet with its complexity and its proposals for further thinking in this short reflection. It will only serve as a start for further conversations.

I

Your prime purpose seems to me to keep together the classical Christian tradition, insights from science, which basically means the evolutionary approach, and human experience.

Let me shortly explain how I understand what you say about their connection.

As I see it, your basic point is, that what we say about God depends on our location within the evolution, and is expressed by means of the symbol ‘God’. Thus evolution conditions God-talk. But theologically it comes with the logic of God-talk that the evolution depends on God. How to balance this?

The whole of life and the whole of the evolution reveal the reality of God, who is neither identical with life, nor separated from life. Trinitarian language helps you to articulate this adequately. God can be conceived of as the source of life or the power of life who communicates himself in giving life as a gift. In my words: Living becomes a way of receiving God.

But then again, not all life is lived well. Life can be a better life if we strive for love and if we recognize that love is the purpose and meaning of life. Life pushes us forward to love. Or stated otherwise: our desire for love and more love draws our lives ahead. In my words again: Living is a way of receiving God, which makes us recognize that the fulfillment of life is love, which joins us with God, who is love.

In this way, nature (life) and grace (love) are closely knit together. All that is, or the whole of life, is related to God, who gives life *and* gives life a chance of perfection, or of opening up, or renewal by grace. Grace, on its turn, is never separated from nature, nor identical with nature, but is like a force present in nature that is opening nature up, and makes it reach beyond itself.

In this way, the classical Christian doctrine and scientific insights can be joined together. This means: they are complementary. The classical Christian doctrine can absorb evolutionary insights, and the evolutionary narrative can be corrected or widened by a theological perspective. The evolutionary narrative should be widened, because it cannot account for the experience that the world and we are called to express the beauty and goodness of God and to protest against evil. Especially in relation to the field of morality the evolutionary perspective is deficient and does not accord to our experiences.

This is where human experience comes in. The issue is not just to harmonize Christian doctrine and evolution for the sake of Christian doctrine itself. The whole point is, that ‘God’ helps us to make more sense of our experiences in the world. God is not an object of our experiences, nor the content of our experiences, but God is the key, the symbol, or the perspective to make sense or to make more sense of our experiences.

Life, love and hope are important phenomena in different realms of life. 1. We can obtain a better understanding of life, love and hope if we use God-talk. 2. The use of ‘God’ or believe in God opens up new and better ways to live, love and hope. (In this way ‘God’ or God-talk enable/ promote/ channel God’s work, which consists in the gift of life and love). 3. If we seriously investigate our experiences we will find that they point beyond themselves, to the God who is in, with and under our worldly experiences and can be abstracted from these experiences as the one who makes these experiences possible and conditions them.

God gives life and, by his grace, continuously makes us desire better life and love, thereby drawing us forward to more intense experiences of life, namely of life as love. ‘Creation is reality’s process toward the fulfillment of nature by grace’.

In this way, I think you draw together the classical Christian tradition, insights from science and human experience. It seems to me that the framework of your ingenious argumentation is heavily dependent on the theology of Pannenberg, albeit with different accents. My first question of course would be whether I got your picture right, even though I rendered your argumentation very concise and inexact.

My next question would be, whether you can really join the traditional Christian doctrine and evolutionary insights (and human experience of course) without being more critical of traditional Christian doctrine. In your book the integral Christian doctrine is preserved. A creation *ex nihilo*, a personal and transcendent God, the atonement, justification by faith, the church and the sacraments all fit with the concept of evolution.

I would like to call to mind the book of Gordon Kaufman, which you cite yourself, *In Face of Mystery*, who says that the problem with our inherited religions is that they never made use of the concept of evolution, whereas this concept is predominant in our shared worldviews nowadays all over the globe. Religions are asked therefore to adjust themselves to this concept. Of course, you are re-interpreting the Christian tradition in many respects. But you claim to articulate the classical Christian tradition and the evolution. Of course, I can think of many reasons to do so, but why not being more firm about the rephrasing of Christian doctrine?

It might be possible, for example, to go in the direction of process theology instead of Pannenberg. In Process-theology, Catherine Keller defended a creation ‘from the deep’ and denied biblical and theological reasons for a creation ‘from nothing’. In process theology one can also defend an open process toward the future. It seems to me, that you are very hesitant about an open process. You talk about ‘an open totality guided by God’. (Of course you know that anyone coming from Levinas would think of ‘an open totality’ as something like a square circle). You also say that all life is present to God (including future life? Is life a totality present to God, future life included, and does this not close the future, unless you take your refuge in the classical doctrine of Boethius, like Pannenberg does?). I don’t want to risk losing myself in details, but they matter. I precisely love your book for your attention for details. My main point is, that you seem somewhat reluctant to really adapt and change classical Christian doctrine in spite of your re-interpretation, for example in the case of an open process, which gives me the impression that the classical Christian tradition is harmonized with the concept of an evolution too easily and rather smoothly. Besides, does the Christian tradition have to be classical to be Christian?

II

I especially liked the section in your book in which you are cross-reading Marion and Tillich on desire. It seems to me that in postmodern literature (Caputo, Kearney, Marion) desire got rid of the negative connotations which are usually attached to it in theological discourse. Desire also seems to escape the postmodern urge for deconstruction and is valued positively under certain conditions.

With Marion you propose that the subject is not first of all a *cogito* – a subject in and for itself, prior to its becoming in relationships with others, desiring to grasp the objects of the world and take them in for its own enlargement and enjoyment. The subject rather is a vulnerable subject, whose first question is: does someone love me? At that stage – to put it simply – the subject is not a subject yet, but a being who is open towards others. The one who asks the question ‘does someone love me’ is not founded in being yet, but in the possibility of being. Its being comes from the other, who confirms the one who asks for love. The outreach of the one who asks is risky and insecure and demands that he/she gives up him/herself. Next, in love desire turns out to be dialectical. I desire and receive my being from the one who loves me, whom I give being by subserving and prioritizing his/her needs. Next to that, our desire for being/ love/ the other is not raised by being, but by non-being, by what is not yet, but is possible. What is not yet presents itself in desire. This way of dealing with the subject corresponds to Marion’s theses that love is prior to being, and that God should be conceived of as love and not as being. I would say that Marion promotes a postmodern concept of the subject and a negative theological approach to God.

In your section on Christology, you put it that Christ affirms the question of the subject. ‘Does someone love me? – Yes, there is someone who loves you’. You also put it that love is the *arche* and *telos* of life. We are created out of love and we will become fulfilled in love. Thus, love sustains our hope.

I very much appreciate your constructive theological work, which is a great contribution, but I also have some doubts. It seems to me that at least a change of perspective comes in here. The vulnerable subject reaches out for others in a risky way with the question whether someone loves me. It is opened up by desire to be engaged in dialectical relationships. But when you assure that there is someone who loves you and that love is the beginning and the fulfillment of life, you are not talking in the *persona* of the vulnerable subject, but in the *persona* of the theologian who oversees it all and has a finalized vison on God and the world and affirms, that someone loves you indeed. As I said, I appreciate your constructive work. But my doubt is: are these perspectives compatible. Does the theologian’s affirmation that someone loves you not precisely overrule and deny the vulnerability of the subject’s original question? The affirmation of the theologian makes

There is broader interest at stake, which may concern me as much as you. In your book on Christology *Desire, Gift and Recognition* you engage with postmodern philosophy. In *Life, Love and Hope* you deal with science and evolution and develop a picture of God and the world. But is it not precisely the postmodern insight that we do not have such a picture and can never get it? Is there a conflict between these approaches and should we choose either way or try to synthesize both ways, if that is possible at all?