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John Webster and Catholic Theology

Fergus Kerr OP

I

John Webster would never — could never — have become a Roman Catholic.[1] Principally, as we shall see, his 'evangelical ecclesiology' was absolutely incompatible with any imaginable account of the nature and role of the church that Catholic theologians would endorse, wherever they stand across the conflict-laden spectrum from post-Vatican II would-be 'conciliarism' to doggedly ultramontanist outlooks (currently foxed by Pope Francis).

On the other hand, Webster's reworking of themes in Thomas Aquinas became notably more important in what turned out the last decade of his life. Moreover, in omnivorous reading all along, Webster also exhibited lively sympathetic interest in current Catholic theology. He mocked himself as 'one of those Protestants who in the 1970s discovered in Balthasar something which kept us reading Roman Catholic theology after Lonergan had wearied us and before we had been pointed to the treasures of *ressourcement* theology'.[2] To a considerable extent, Webster's theology was shaped by Catholic theology, by dissent, especially as regards ecclesiology, and with delight, regarding God and creation.

As for reading Bernard Lonergan in the 1970s, did his memory play tricks? At Cambridge, in 1975, aged twenty, Webster switched from reading English to Theology. Donald MacKinnon, one of the few theologians there whom he much respected, was the first Oxbridge academic to recognize the significance of Hans Urs von Balthasar beyond the book on Karl Barth.[3] Since its appearance in 1957 Lonergan was read in the English-speaking Catholic world principally for *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, a major work of

[1] John Webster, Professor of Divinity at the University of St Andrews, died on 25 May 2016 aged sixty. See the tribute by Ivor J. Davidson, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* October 2016: 360-375.

[2] *Scottish Journal of Theology* May 2009: 202.

[3] See Donald M. MacKinnon, 'Masters in Israel III: Hans Urs von Balthasar', *The Clergy Review* 54 (1969): 859-69.

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philosophy.[4] In those days, Catholics took up theology professionally only after two/three years of serious philosophical studies. *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (1968) and *Grace and Freedom* (1971), Lonergan's valuable textual studies of themes in Aquinas, are unlikely to have drawn Webster's attention at this stage. *Method in Theology* (1972) looks very much like the kind of supposedly indispensable methodological prolegomena which, later at least, Webster would regard as unnecessary and even ruinous. On John M. Todd's initiative, Darton, Longman & Todd published several books by Lonergan in the early 1970s, advancing him as the leading English-speaking Catholic theologian, comparable with Karl Rahner, and the other Vatican II celebrities. Perhaps young Webster read *The Way to Nicea* (*sic*), published in 1976, the translation of the first part of Lonergan's two-volume *De Deo Trino* (1964), lectures at the Gregorian University in Rome, which surely no one in Cambridge then (or since) ever read.[5] It seems more likely, anyway, that Webster discovered *ressourcement* theology in the late 1980s through George P. Schner, the other Canadian Jesuit theologian.

John Webster emerged on the theological scene as exponent and translator of the German Lutheran theologian Eberhard Jüngel, about whom he wrote his Cambridge PhD thesis (completed in 1982). This interest culminated in his translation of Jüngel's book on Karl Barth: *God's Being is in Becoming: the Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth: A Paraphrase* (2001). By then, teaching at Oxford, Webster was established as an interpreter of Barth. In *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (1995) and *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (1998), he refuted those who claim that Barth's emphasis on the doctrine of God results in nullifying human agency (not that they have all noticed). Webster's reading of Barth is beautifully set forth in *Barth* (2000), commissioned, as it happens, by Brian Davies OP, formerly Regent of Blackfriars Hall, Oxford, for the Outstanding Christian Thinkers series.

II

Thomas Aquinas is never mentioned in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (2001, reissued 2016), dedicated to the memory of George Schner. However, several recent Catholic theologians are cited. In particular, Hans Urs von Balthasar plays a decisive part in the

[4] As forcefully argued by Hugo Meynell, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Bernard Lonergan* (1976).

[5] Always the exception: Donald MacKinnon mentions Lonergan's *De Deo Trino* in his introductory essay to Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God* (translated by John Halliburton 1975) cf p. 13.

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earliest paper: 'Jesus in Modernity: Reflections on Jüngel's Christology' (1997). This lengthy, often moving, quite critical, reconstruction of Jüngel's presentation of Jesus climaxes in this characteristic admonition: 'Theology ought to be frightening, perilous ... because the one to whom theology gives its attention is unimaginably demanding' (188). Too many theologians, Webster believed, are at ease in their work, inappropriately.

However, much as he likes Jüngel's 'onslaught on idealism' and rejection of 'theism' (some generic deity, as in conventional philosophy of religion, supposedly), the 'robustness of Jüngel's Christologically-derived thought' is threatened by residual existentialism, inherited from the biblical scholarship of Rudolf Bultmann. Turning to the opening volume of Balthasar's *Theodramatik* (1983), Webster observes that Jüngel and Balthasar have much in common: 'a repudiation of the subjectivism of the German idealist inheritance; a Christocentrism learned from Barth; a rich theology of the divine passion'. On the other hand, since his work is 'lacking Jüngel's ties to existentialism and its spasmodic Christology', Balthasar is able to develop a much more satisfactory account of the life of the incarnate one, such that it 'takes place in the historical, public world, and is therefore more than a collection of occurrences or speech-acts' (188). In effect, the flaw that Webster sees in Jüngel's Christology — failure to communicate how Jesus is 'the embodiment now of the divine "I am"' — could be corrected by drafting in Balthasar. Thus, in this, his final major engagement with Jüngel, Webster concludes that the great German Lutheran's Christology could be corrected in the light of the maverick Swiss Catholic's depiction of Jesus.

Several other Catholic theologians appear in *Word and Church*, coming in for criticism as well as for endorsement. Ferdinand Christian Bauerschmidt, for example, cited from *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (1999), the 'manifesto' of the movement initiated by John Milbank, is commended for his (quasi-Barthian) comment that 'the possibility of speech about God can be founded on nothing less than God's own speaking' (267). This approbation comes in 'Eschatology and Anthropology', a paper in which Webster rejects 'the sovereign, self-enclosed, self-identical subject of modernity', as Milbank's project also does, and without succumbing to 'the postmodern dissolution of the self into unstructurable, utterly discrete moments' (282), as do Protestants like Mark Taylor and Calvin Schrag, quite at odds of course with Radical Orthodoxy.

As far as the decline of Christian culture in the West goes, the now classic genealogies by the American Jesuit Michael J. Buckley (*At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 1987) and Louis Dupré (*Passage to Modernity*, 1993), Schner's *Doktorvater* at Yale, are strongly

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commended (152). Their accounts are, after all, not difficult to co-ordinate with Jüngel's in *God as the Mystery of the World* (1982).

It needn't have been Catholic theologians whom Webster chose to castigate in 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', but none offered a more tempting target than the eminent French Dominican Claude Geffré, who actually made the move in the 1970s explicitly from *dogmatics* to *hermeneutics* (48).[6]

Mainly, however, the focus is on Werner Jeanrond (Master of St Benet's Hall, Oxford, since 2012). His books are 'sophisticated', Webster allows, generously complimentary as usual before delivering the knockout: they offer a 'rather underfed theology' (50-51). The problem with Jeanrond's 'striking works' is that the Christian doctrine on offer is 'rather pale and thin' compared with the complex, rigorous and subtle hermeneutical theory on which the doctrine supposedly depends for intelligibility. Even worse, Jeanrond's 'mentor', David Tracy (the leading Catholic at the Chicago Divinity School, retired 2006), takes hermeneutical theory to rest on 'a transcendental anthropology of the experiencing and interpreting subject whose terms are derived largely from existentialist phenomenology' (51). Thus, not only does substantial exposition of Christian doctrine wane under the weight of supposedly indispensable theorizing about how theology is possible at all, — worse still, the theory rests on the philosophical anthropology of the self-conscious ego.

Webster has a good word for the Christology of Jean Galot (1919-2008), perhaps the most eminent and certainly among the most conservative of the Jesuit theologians in Rome in his day (136). On the other hand, Roger Haight's 'nominalist Christology' exemplifies precisely how not to do things (126). The American Jesuit's book *Jesus Symbol of God,* as Webster no doubt knew, while winning the top prize in theology from the US Catholic Press Association in 1999, led to Haight's being banned from publishing by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and forbidden from teaching anywhere, including at non-Catholic institutions.[7] The CDF objected, as Webster does, to Haight's project of disentangling Christology from Greek metaphysics.

The CDF theologians would not have agreed with Webster that the Flemish Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx had the right idea about ecclesiology. In the context of the recent 'luxuriant growth of ecclesial ethics', what we need, Webster quotes him as saying, is 'a bit of *negative theology*, church theology in a minor key' – a significant proposal, Webster adds, coming as it does from a theologian in 'a tradition with a rather long track record in producing industrial-strength

[6] Claude Geffré died on 9 February 2017 aged 91; I attended his lectures on Thomas Aquinas's Christology at Le Saulchoir 1962/3.

[7] Currently scholar-in-residence at Union Theological Seminary, New York City.

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ecclesiologies' (214). In this essay – 'The Self-organizing Power of the Gospel of Christ: Episcopacy and Community Formation' — Webster starts from Michael Ramsey's 'potent and celebrated' book *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (1936) to lay out 'a dogmatics of episcopacy' which, perhaps affected by his years as a Canon Residentiary at Christ Church, turns out to depart fundamentally, even gleefully, from 'serene Anglican accounts' (210) — not even Rowan Williams will do (205) — all of which repudiates High Anglican ecclesiology and confirms that any likely Roman Catholic account of the church would have been totally unacceptable.

III

Thomas Aquinas appears in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (2005), with the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac, well ahead of anyone else, except for Barth.

The book opens with 'Theological Theology', the inaugural lecture at Oxford in 1997. It is framed by *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Buckley's 'quite wonderful study', the genealogy Webster assumes we all take for granted (18). He makes graceful reference to George Schner's appeal to 'the classical priority of the object of theological study' (25), the principle that methods in theological work should not be decided by the subjective conditions of the inquiry but by the object to which attention is directed — a basic Webster concern. No other Catholic theologians are mentioned. According to the argument, intellectual activity in British academic culture is mesmerized by the epistemological virtues of the natural sciences — objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, value-free inquiry, and suchlike. Theology, biblical studies, etc., in order to remain respectable, operate under the same *wissenschaftlich* ideals. In contrast, *theological* theology would make its distinctive contribution by allowing its norms and ends to be determined by reference to its object, namely 'the presence of the perfect God to the saints', not by the rules for scholarship practised in other disciplines (7). Besides doing its own job properly, such theology would challenge other disciplines to ask if their methods were necessarily any more neutral, etc. Rather wryly, Webster concludes by granting that this is all quite 'utopian'.

As regards Catholic theologians, *Confessing God* offers a good deal, in particular another essay on what is meant by 'church', with Henri de Lubac as the principal interlocutor: 'On evangelical ecclesiology'. Referencing the notorious debate in mid-twentieth century Catholic theology set off by *Surnaturel* (1946), Webster comments that 'the work of figures as diverse as von Balthasar and Milbank is unthinkable without the possibilities which de Lubac opened' (162) — namely, the dethronement of Neo-Thomism. Hans

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Urs von Balthasar is mentioned again: for all his 'superbly attentive and sympathetic rendering of Barth's intentions' in the Barth book, his account of Barth's 'espousing a docetic ecclesiology' Webster finds wide of the mark (178) — no doubt dictated by Balthasar's Catholic theology of the church, though Webster does not quite say so.

As for Catholic ideas about the church, the 'foundational modern text' is Henri de Lubac's *Catholicisme* (1938): 'surely one of the enduring ecclesiological essays of its century' (158). With great delicacy and respect Webster expounds de Lubac's 'communion ecclesiology', before rejecting it completely (158-166). He steers between unnamed Protestant theologians for whom the church is simply extrinsic to the saving action of Christ and the Holy Spirit, a position that Webster deplores, and on the other hand, reacting to them, indeed over-reacting as he thinks, he names his fellow Anglican John Milbank (charged with rendering Christ wholly resolvable into the church) and the eminent Lutheran Robert Jenson (for whom Christ and the church are the same thing, allegedly). Compared with such 'ecclesiological hypertrophy' (156) the French Jesuit is 'a good deal more measured' (165). Nevertheless the characteristically Catholic 'ontological union between Christ and the body of the church' eventually surfaces, this 'over-elaborated theology of the spousal union between Christ and the church' (exemplified in another Catholic theologian, David L. Schindler cf. 165), producing a 'porous Christology' (165), one that refuses the sovereignty of the Risen Lord over the Church.

In the end, as he unfolds his modest Anglican 'dogmatics of the mutuality between God and creatures' (166), Webster sets 'communion ecclesiology' against 'ecclesiology of fellowship'. Talk of communion slips too easily into 'mutual coinherence', 'shared being', as if the created and uncreated melt in confusion into one another; whereas fellowship, while carrying a sense of intimacy, retains the sense of 'unbridgeable gulf', and thus of the necessarily uncompromisable separation between creature and Creator —or so it seems to Webster.[8]

With nothing to contribute to this ecclesiological difference, Thomas Aquinas figures first in 'The Immensity and Ubiquity of God', and then in 'Hope'.

With respect to the doctrine of God, Webster sides silently with students of Aquinas who think that the questions *de Deo Uno* in the *Summa Theologiae* are not best read as anticipating Neo-Thomist apologetics. He opens with the so-called 'perfect being' theology in recent Anglo-American philosophy of religion (naming Katherin

[8] Well set out in 'God's Perfect Life', *God's Life in Trinity* edited by M. Volf and M. Welker (2006): 150.

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A. Rogers, Richard Swinburne among others), contending that it is 'problematic': it operates with a concept of a generic deity 'largely uncorrected by the event of God's free self-enactment as Father, Son and Spirit' (88). But this is the thinking of Samuel Clarke, the early eighteenth-century Anglican divine, not that of the great classical divines, like Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, whatever operators in the field these days imagine. God's omnipresence, appropriately conceived, is the omnipresence of God's agency (102): 'Deus est in omnibus rebus, non quidem sicut pars essentiae, vel sicut accidens, sed sicut agens adest ei in quod agit' (*Summa Theologiae* 1a. 8.1). This Webster takes to mean that God's omnipresence is not just the given of some infinite reality, it is the dynamic presence of the Lord God: 'It is purposive; and it is known not as simple cosmological fact, but in the course of the drama of God's dealings with his creation as its maker and as the agent of its reconciliation and perfection' (101). No doubt Aquinas took this for granted, having no need to spell it out.

The French Jesuit Bertrand de Margerie (1923-2003) has already been called on here in support of the thesis that there is no conflict between the transcendence and the immanence of God: God is 'nowhere' and 'everywhere' (99-100).

According to Webster, Aquinas works, not from a generic notion of *deitas* but from God's self-demonstration as announced in Holy Scripture. By this time, as he notes in the 2016 reissue of *Word and Church,* he finds himself placing 'not a little emphasis on the intrusive character of the Christian gospel' — 'on the impossibility of enfolding it within moral, cultural or religious practice' — a minority view he believes, which is why he has to preface consideration of any particular doctrine 'by presenting a pathology of modern Christian divinity' (ix). In other words, the theological projects of most of his contemporaries he has to begin by showing are misconceived.

The paper on 'Hope' reconstructs the Christian virtue in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity. While he references obvious recent authorities like Paul Lehmann, Jürgen Moltmann, Rubem Alves and others, including Barth, all Protestants, he weaves in key quotations also from Catholic authors: Robert Spaemann, the foremost Catholic philosopher in Germany, a member of Pope Benedict XVI's *Schülerkreis* (hope as an aspect of who one is); Nicholas Lash, MacKinnon's successor in the Norris-Hulse chair at Cambridge (hope is not 'nescience'); and Josef Pieper (1904-1997), the most prolific interpreter of Aquinas in post-1945 Germany (hope as wholly supernatural). Essentially, this chapter reworks question 40 of the *prima secundae*: 'A Christian moral theology of hope begins ... with the perfection of the triune God' (200).

Webster is evidently attracted by the way that, in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas sets ethics inside dogmatics. He never mentions

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Leonard E. Boyle, the Irish Dominican scholar, who taught in Toronto from 1961 to 1984. Too late to attend, he must nevertheless have read Boyle's famous Gilson Lecture (1982): 'The setting of the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas'. This is the key text that establishes the originality of the *Summa*: situating the account in the *secunda pars* of human agency, virtue, grace etc., between the doctrine of God and creation in the *prima,* with Christology and the sacraments in the *tertia.*

Moreover, in these 'initial clarifications of an approach to Christian doctrine of which I hope in the future to offer a more ample and systematic treatment' (1), Webster reflects that he has come to understand the importance of the concept of God's perfection — now (2005) the key concept in his theology: 'an attempt to give conceptual expression to the great divine tautology: I am who I am' — 'part of the force of that tautology [being] that God both specifies his own perfection and declares it in the enactment of himself' (2).

Webster does not mention Aquinas at this point — perhaps he thought there was no need. The 'divine tautology' heads Aquinas's consideration of 'five ways in which one can prove that there is a God' (*ST* 1a 2.3), not that Catholic apologetics always paid heed. For Aquinas, God's perfection comes on stage in question 4 of the *prima pars*, obviously important in the hierarchy of divine attributes, between God's simpleness (question 3) and the Good (question 5), yet it is a rather thin, skeletal, and very schematic concept in comparison with Webster's richly developed, multi-layered and Scripturally grounded picture.

The notion of God's perfection, so Webster goes on, is 'somewhat muted in contemporary theology' (3). One reason for this is the 'surprising persistence' of North American 'process' theology, which denies the completeness of God. Also, theologians shy away from considering the immanent life of the Trinity, assuming we can speak intelligibly only of God as self-disclosed in history. For others, however, 'the prestige of the ecclesiology of *communio* and widespread attraction to the language of virtue and practice in talking of the Christian life' work against a dogmatics of the attributes of God (3). In short, Catholic notions of the church undermine our doctrine of the triune God.

IV

In *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (2012), Thomas Aquinas and Augustine are cited more than anyone else, including Karl Barth. More consideration is now paid to patristic and mediaeval authors, as well as to post-Reformation scholastics (ix). The last include Franciscus Junius the Elder (1545-1602),

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Francis Turretin (1623-1687) and John Owen (1616-1687), all cited here. Cassian, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Gregory the Great and especially Augustine (copiously) represent the patristic era. As well as Bonaventure (one whole essay) the mediaevals mentioned include Bernard of Clairvaux, Henry of Ghent, Hugh of St Victor, Rupert of Deutz, among others, some of whom are surely quoted at second hand. Above all, however, it is with Thomas Aquinas that the preface culminates, quoting the first question of the *Summa Theologiae* (x).

Already quoted is the Canadian Catholic Kenneth Schmitz, professor of philosophy at Toronto (emeritus), author of *The Gift: Creation* (1982), another Aquinas Lecture Webster was not yet there to attend but which is obviously assimilated into his deepening interest in the doctrine of creation (see *God without Measure* Volume I: 111–112). In another important paper (1983), Schmitz argues that the history of metaphysical thought since the sixteenth century may best be characterized by a decline in respect for analysis by ontological principles in favour of analysis by quantitative elements — an 'immense and immensely damaging' development, which Webster finds at work also in Protestant theology and biblical hermeneutics (vii).

Matthew Levering is referenced on several occasions, mostly for his book *Participatory Biblical Exegesis* (6, 11). Webster remains unconvinced by talk of participation in theology (14), — it misleads Levering into forgetting that 'the teaching church is first and foremost the hearing church, a domain of receiving before one of teaching and proclamation; in a real sense, the Word is and must remain alien if it is to communicate its benefits' (25). Like everyone else, Levering overlooks the important work on biblical hermeneutics by T.F. Torrance (87). In his *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*, however, Levering sees theological work as an ascetic discipline, an intellectual activity in which the church 'participates in the mortification of reason which is inescapable if the children of Adam are to become the friends of God' (131-2).

Webster again cites Robert Spaemann with approval (124): *Persons: the Difference between 'someone' and 'something'* (2006). He also likes Denys Turner's description of reason as 'a grace, and gift of love' (122), in his *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (2004). Finally, in this chapter — 'Biblical Reasoning'— Eleonore Stump has the right idea about how deistic views of revelation underlie some cases of historical-critical biblical scholarship (120). Perhaps it just so happens that Schmitz, Levering, Spaemann. Turner and Stump are Catholic; it would be easy to find others who say much the same kind of things: on the other hand, they are the ones on whom Webster draws as he shapes his own views.

Perhaps the most surprising appearance is that of the great Franciscan theologian Bonaventure (Giovanni di Fidanza, 1221–1274). In

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another critical meditation on the 'research culture' of the humanities in our universities, Webster again seeks a return to properly theological theology, conducting the case entirely in conversation with quotations from across the range of Bonaventure's works. *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology* Webster regards as 'an exquisite text, an elegantly patterned, economical and spiritually charged articulation of a Christian metaphysics of created intelligence in which all the arts are moved by divine wisdom' (173). Thomas Aquinas makes a late appearance, depicting wisdom as a supernatural gift (190).

Nevertheless Aquinas is cited throughout this collection. In 'Illumination' (50-64) Webster discusses the work of the Holy Spirit in the dispensation of salvation. He does not mention physical premotion; but, insisting that the operation of created intellect is not compromised by divine causality, he appeals to a familiar Thomist locus (55-56): 'An intellectual operation does have its origin from the mind in which it takes place as from its secondary cause, but from God as its primary cause' (*ST* 1a 105.3 ad 1). Aquinas's principle of double agency is fundamental.

Again, in 'Principles of Systematic Theology' (133-149), Aquinas plays a decisive part. In the first question of the *Summa,* holy teaching is located not simply in the sphere of human inquiry; it is set in the vocation of rational creatures (134). Here, agreeing with Lewis Ayres, Webster would like serious critique of how systematic theology is done in mainstream Anglo-American theological culture ('or cultures, at least on the surface there is not much consensus'). For one thing, naming no names, some practitioners regard systematic theology as 'a mode of public engagement', rather than 'an act of contemplative intelligence'. The ontological, and therefore the epistemological, condition is put correctly by Aquinas 'in a sentence of stunning simplicity' (137): 'Holy teaching decides about God most properly as deepest origin and highest end, and that not only because of what can be gathered about him from creatures (as philosophers have recognized, cf *Romans* 1, 19), but also because of what he alone knows about himself, and yet discloses for others to share' (*ST* 1a 1,6).

Moreover, *sacra doctrina* — 'Thomas, once more' (140) — 'assumes its principles from elsewhere (*aliunde*)' — 'the principles of this teaching are suppositions from another place (*aliunde*)'. This *aliunde* obviously fascinated Webster. The word occurs only in the first objection to identifying *sacra doctrina* with wisdom (*ST* 1a 1, 6 obj. 1). Rather unusually, Aquinas doesn't repeat it in his snappy reply: 'Holy teaching assumes its principles not from any human knowledge but from the divine knowledge by which as by the sovereign wisdom all our knowledge is governed'. That makes it clear: theological work, for Aquinas, takes place within the much broader, more comprehensive activity of holy teaching, which has

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come to us through revelation beyond anything discovered by reason (cf *ST* 1a 1,1). Webster obviously liked the emphasis on theological work as an exercise within the economy of divine grace. The derivative character of theology — its receiving its principles from the triune God's self-knowledge — is problematic in the university, he grants, since it 'accords priority to the presence and operation of the object of theological enquiry . . . over the operation of the cognitive subject' (140-1) — a favourite theme. Aquinas, in this like Barth, treats God and the works of God 'according to the metaphysical-dogmatic priority of God' (142). That is to say: Aquinas treats everything *sub ratione Dei* (145). In the end, of course, 'in a culture which has been deprived of a sense that rational creatures have a celestial final cause and which cannot envisage contemplation as a mode of science' (149), what was possible for Aquinas to do in theology is very difficult for us today.

The chapters on conflict in theology (150-170), theology in the university (171-192), and the vice of curiosity (193-202) engage with Aquinas in varying degree. In 'Theology and the peace of the church' Webster's use of Aquinas is quite extensive. Since everything in theology is considered *sub ratione Dei*, reflection on theological controversy must start from the lack of conflict — the peace — in the triune God's inner life. From the immanent Trinity we move to the economy, the outworking of the divine peace in creation, preservation and reconciliation, supremely in the mission of the Son and as enacted by the Holy Spirit in the church and communicated in Scripture. Only then, with this background reconstructed, may we consider theology, attending as it does to Scripture, articulating it for us, in ways that will always involve debate, controversy, and conflict, and so will require 'an ascetics of theological work'. Webster likes Aquinas's 'intriguing phrase' (156): 'The soul's principal movement is to rest in God' (*ST* 2a 2ae 29, 2 ad 4). Principally, however, he recommends Aquinas's extensive depiction of sins against peace (2a 2ae 37–42). In particular, in a remark that would have delighted an old fashioned Thomist, he notes that Aquinas, with his doctrine of vice as 'an absence or privation of being rather than a morally ugly mode of being', did not envisage conflict or any other sin 'in Manichee fashion (all too common these days)' (161). Conflict and peace are not evenly matched (cf 1a 48, 1). Going somewhat beyond what Aquinas explicitly says, Webster assures us that there is no place in Aquinas for a 'moral culture of gloom' (161). While for Aquinas difference of opinion should not mean failure in charity, Webster concedes that there are conflicts in theology that are generated from fundamental differences about the truth. Such conflicts, he concludes, 'are not conflicts *within* the church so much as *about* the church' (169).

'*Regina* Artium: Theology and the Humanities' reworks texts by Bonaventure, for whom (Webster says) there was no conflict of the

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faculties between the arts and theology: theology was not a 'faculty' in the modern sense but 'a culture, a mode of thought, prayer and holiness which permeates all acts of intelligence' (181). This is an attractive picture of how theology might enfold the humanities, as a surrounding, supportive and challenging environment, rather than a discipline on its own, either talking a private language or doing social anthropology. (Aquinas, and surely also Bonaventure, experienced plenty of conflict between the faculties at Paris.)

'Curiosity' opens with Aquinas's consideration of the virtue of *studiositas* (*ST* 2a 2ae 166): 'Study, properly speaking, implies close mental application to something', *vehementem applicationem mentis*. When this is corrupted, as happens because of the disordered desires in our fallen condition, the virtue of *studiositas* degenerates into the vice of *curiositas*. Aquinas's summary of what a victim of *curiositas* is like must have delighted Webster: 'as when a person strives to know the truth about creatures without heeding its rightful end, namely knowing about God' (2a 2ae 167, 1).

This encourages Webster to remind us once more that theology does not — should not — deal with everything indiscriminately but everything *sub ratione Dei* (1a 1, 7). Theology is a 'restricted science'; one doesn't want the theological intellect 'dissipated by giving itself to whatever enchanting objects catch its fancy'. But 'part of the frailty of some modern Protestant theology is unwillingness to venture beyond considering the *beneficia Christi* and reluctance to engage questions of speculative divinity' (201).

V

In *God without Measure*: *Working Papers in Christian Theology* volume I *God and the Works of God* (2016) Thomas Aquinas is cited as often as Barth, ahead of Calvin or anyone else. The volume opens with the principle Webster had by now taken as his own: 'everything is treated in sacred doctrine *sub ratione Dei*' (*ST* 1a 1,7). However, the principle is introduced here (introduced indeed, for most of us, Catholic readers anyway, hearing of them for the first time) by way of Franciscus Junius (1594), the *Synopsis purioris theologiae* (1625), and Johann Friedrich König (1664): dogmatics, done properly, considers God absolutely and relatively before moving to treat everything else — the order followed in the *Summa Theologiae.*

This order is not always followed these days, Webster regrets. The result is that many theologians 'envisage theological inquiry as an instance of religious sociology or literary and historical studies' (7). Such moves may be justified, at least explainable, by ecological concern for the creation, or by a certain 'Christological maximalism', or by 'impatience with metaphysics', wanting to keep Christian doctrine

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clear of 'theism' and 'natural religion' (8). Yet, we should begin not from the effects of God as historical agent but with 'a well-formed doctrine of God's immanent triune plenitude and bliss' (9).

Chapter 12 (177-194) argues forcefully against Protestant theologians who turn ecclesiology into a social science — mere ethnography! Chapter 13 (198-212) reprints the paper on Congar's ecclesiology in Gabriel Flynn's collection (see section VII below).

Of the other twelve papers in this collection Aquinas plays a significant part in seven. Chapter 4 (43-58) deals with the place of Christology in systematic theology. John Owen, Isaak August Dorner and Albrecht Ritschl contribute much more than Aquinas.

In chapter 10 (143-157), treating the place of soteriology in dogmatics, Calvin more than Aquinas documents the thought that the history of Jesus becomes intelligible only in the light of the doctrine of the hypostatic union and thus of the triune God (156).

But then we come to a set of splendid papers all of which rework Aquinas. Chapter 6 (83-98) — 'Trinity and Creation' — spells out Aquinas's remark (*ST* 1a 32, 1 ad 3) to the effect that, for us to perceive the world rightly, knowledge of the Trinity was needed. As Webster says, this essay is 'no more than an extended gloss on a statement of Thomas' (145) — by this stage, Webster is happy to rework Aquinas. Chapter 7 (99-113) deals with *creatio ex nihilo* and creaturely goodness: with help from Kenneth Schmitz again, as well as David Braine and Robert Sokolovski, the key point is that the doctrine of creation out of nothing 'is not cosmology or philosophy of nature or anthropology, but the Holy Trinity's perfection and benevolence' (102).

David Braine, like David Burrell (Notre Dame) and Robert Sokolovski (The Catholic University of America), show us that philosophers sometimes have a far better understanding of how theology should be conducted than many dogmaticians (85). They see that the triune God never needed the world: 'no perfection of God would be lost, no triune bliss compromised, were the world not to exist; no enhancement of God is achieved by the world's existence' (91). Braine in particular was at ease with this 'seemingly austere but in reality entirely delightful' doctrine (107).[9]

Chapter 8 (115-126), on 'God's relation to creatures', again invoking Schmitz, Braine, Sokolovski among others, expounds Aquinas's thesis that, while we creatures are dependent on God, God is absolutely independent of us: 'The existence of creation adds nothing to God, and in its absence God would be undiminished' — a characteristically Thomist doctrine from which 'many recoil', such as Charles Hartshorne (125). Chapter 9 (127-141) deals with the theology of

[9] David Braine, who died on 17 February 2017, taught philosophy at Aberdeen.

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providence: here Webster draws more on the seventeenth century Reformed theologian Francis Turretin — 'that astute reader of Aquinas' (139) — than on Aquinas himself, but the famous Thomist thesis reappears (*ST* 1a 105, 5): 'God's acting in creatures must be understood in such a way that they themselves still exercise their own operations'.

Chapter 14 (213-224), reprinted from *The Journal of Analytic Theology*, highlights the contemplative dimension of 'regenerate theological activity'. Much theological activity today settles into literary-historical exegesis, or plays down metaphysical ambition, or treats doctrine as ancillary to pastoral practice — 'Its elimination of the contemplative is an inhibition of theology's theological character' (220), sounding a new note with that reference to contemplation.

In insisting on the *sub ratione Dei* principle Webster must have been aware, though never spelling it out, that he was taking the same line as Aquinas did as regards the various theological options on offer in his day (*ST* 1a 1,7): 'Some writers, preoccupied with the things treated of by sacred doctrine rather than with the formal interest engaged, have indicated its subject-matter otherwise, apportioning it between the reality and its symbols, or regarding it as the work of redemption, or the whole Christ, namely head and members'.

Aquinas names nobody but we know whose projects he had in mind: Peter Lombard's, with his focus on 'the reality and its symbols'; Hugh of St Victor's option for 'the works of redemption'; and *totus Christus idest caput et membra,* 'the whole Christ, head and members', the option chosen by Robert of Melun, Gilbert de la Porrée, Robert Grosseteste, and Robert Kilwardby.[10]

It would be a great fun game at a theologians' party to pick the modern projects most like these — the *totus Christus* option sounds very like the merger of Christ with the church that Webster detected in the communion ecclesiologies that he found so unacceptable.

VI

In *God without Measure* Volume II *Virtue and Intellect*, Aquinas and Augustine are cited twice as much as Barth or Calvin. These essays deal with the moral and intellectual virtues, as Thomists would say: of the eleven papers seven are on matters that one would expect to be considered in the *secunda secundae*.

The brief introductory chapter reintroduces the principle that everything in *sacra doctrina* should be considered *sub ratione Dei*. How Christology is related to ethics, not a question that exercised

[10] *Summa Theologiae* Blackfriars Edition volume I (1964): 26-27

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Aquinas, is treated in chapter 2 (5-27) by meditative exegesis of the Letter to the Colossians. In chapter 3 (29-47) the question of what human dignity means (the topic in hand) has to be set in the context of 'an orderly presentation of the ways and works of God, arising from contemplation of the intrinsic and unsurpassable worth of God *in se*' (29). In chapter 4 (49-66), on mercy, Aquinas appears (54): 'God alone is good by nature, *per suam essentiam*' (*ST* 1a 6.3), which does not exclude goodness as a gift to human creatures being related to God's majestic goodness (54). Chapter 5 (67-85), on sorrow, is a set of variations on the twenty-seven questions in the *secunda pars* on the passions, specifically questions 35–39. Chapter 6 (87-102), similarly, on courage, is a reworking of the questions *de fortitudine*.[11] In chapter 7 (103-121), exploring 'mortification and vivification', terminology that a Catholic theologian would never use, Aquinas's remarks about baptism are drawn into the argument (106-7). Chapter 8 (103-121) is another reworking of Aquinas, this time on sins committed in speech (2a2ae 67–76).

Chapter 9 (141-56), on 'the intellectual life', culminates with Aquinas's saying: 'The ultimate fulfilment of the human intellect is divine truth, other truths enrich the intellect by being ordered to divine truth' (2a2ae 180, 4 ad 4).

Chapter 10 (157-172) takes us back to the Oxford inaugural: the place of theology in universities, and chapter 11 (173-187), closing the collection, gives us Webster's inaugural lecture at St Andrews.

Kenneth Schmitz is quoted in chapter 10 — 'Analysis by principles and Analysis by Elements' again (158) — as well as Gavin D'Costa (167: '*fuga mundi* is a necessary condition for the pursuit of theology as an act of religion') and Etienne Gilson, one of the progenitors of Thomism post Neo-Thomism (168: 'just as the royalty of Christ dominates the order of nature and the order of society, so also it dominates the order of the intelligence'). Happily for us in *New Blackfriars*, if rather surprisingly, Cornelius Ernst's inaugural lecture as Regent at Blackfriars, Oxford in 1966 is quoted (171): theology as 'evangelical clarification', a phrase very much in tune with Webster's thinking, as no doubt was Ernst's hopes for a restoration by his fellow Dominicans of a habitable environment for serious theological work. This chapter reprints an article first published in *Communio*, the famously 'conservative' Catholic journal (Balthasar, de Lubac), reworked in the *festschrift* for Jüngel's eightieth birthday, and here again in *God without Measure* (Webster never minded recycling). While it mentions no other recent Catholic authors the

[11] Written for the *festschrift*, which became the *gedenkschrift* for Ralph Del Colle (1954-2012), Webster's coeditor on *The International Journal of Systematic Theology.*

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text is saturated with references to Aquinas. Created things can be considered by theologians only *sub ratione Dei* (158, 171). Theological work is an act of holiness (159). It is 'contemplative', and in a tradition (163). It requires the virtue of *prudentia* (169). By way of metaphysics, theology 'alone can teach us what is the last end of nature and intelligence' (171, quoting *ST* 2a 2ae 83, 3 ad 3).

VII

John Webster contributed to four important collections of essays on Catholic theology: *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, edited by Edward J. Oakes SJ and David Moss (2004); *Yves Congar: Theologian of the Church*, edited by Gabriel Flynn (2005); *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God* edited by Thomas Joseph White OP (2011); and *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-century Catholic Theology*, edited by Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (2012).

In 'Balthasar and Karl Barth' in *The Cambridge Companion* (241-255) Webster's focus is of course on Balthasar's book on Barth (1951, unabridged translation 1992): 'a penetrating intervention in Roman Catholic conversation with Barth, made at a point at which Barth was (as Balthasar is fully aware) 'still at work shaping his thought', yet extraordinarily alert both to Barth's deepest intentions and to the way in which they presented themselves to creative and ecumenically minded Catholic thought of the time'.

As Webster grants, Balthasar's periodization of Barth's development is a mischaracterization (from dialectic to analogy: from a polarized account of God and created humanity to a God-created correspondence between God and humanity). The lecture courses that would or should have made him reconsider did not appear until years later. For Barth himself, Balthasar's book was 'incomparably more powerful' than most other studies of his work at the time (*KD* IV/1, 1953).

Webster lists three central issues that Balthasar identified. First, the question of the analogical relation between God and creatures; then Barth's so-called 'actualism'; and thirdly the Christological 'narrowing' or 'constriction' (*Engführung*) which Balthasar detected.

With his mentor Henri de Lubac, Balthasar rejected Neo-Thomist assertions of a purely natural destiny for human beings. Balthasar had to steer his way between Barth's famous remark that the *analogia entis* was 'the invention of the Anti-Christ' (*KD* I/1) and Vatican I's equally spectacular anathema on Catholics who deny that God 'can certainly be known [*certo cognosci posse*] from created things by

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the natural light of human reason'.[12] Once the anathema is cleared of Neo-Thomist interpretation, as in chapter 2 of Balthasar's book, Barth's objections are defused. For that matter, Barth already accepted Gottlieb Söhngen's account of *analogia entis* (cf *KD* II/1); he just doubted it was Catholic.

Secondly, Balthasar objects to Barth's picture of salvation as 'interruptive event', traceable to Luther's 'actualism': 'God's presence has no worldly breadth or permanence'. Like many other critics, so Webster contends, Balthasar passes over the ethics spread through *Church Dogmatics*. Agreed, Barth had little interest in institutional Christianity; yet the extensive depictions of the human, public and practical shape that the reality of reconciliation with God takes, place Christianity securely in time and place.[13]

Thirdly, Barth's stress on *Christus solus* marginalizes the ways in which Christ's saving activity is communicated ecclesially, which seems to Webster a not implausible objection.

Neither Balthasar nor Barth regarded theology as 'disinterested inquiry', Webster notes. Neither sought to co-ordinate Christianity with the surrounding culture, let alone 'modern culture', he remarks with even greater satisfaction. They were free to produce 'unconventional theologies of remarkable imaginative power'. While Barth's work was little affected by their friendship, Webster concludes, Balthasar's was greatly indebted to the older man's example: 'his sheer objectivity, his breathless fascination with the subject matter of the gospel, his capacity to edify by description' (254).[14]

In the Congar volume Webster deals with what he regards as another great book (this essay is reprinted in *God without Measure* I): Congar's *Tradition and Traditions* (two volumes in the original, 1960 and 1963; combined into one in English, 1966). This 'deeply impressive book', 'a classic of *ressourcement* theology', 'a very joyful piece of theology', fulfils all that Webster hoped to find in good theology: 'it is a book animated by a sense that theology is rational worship in the church'— the church understood, however, as 'the realization in time of the self-communication of the triune God'. This picture of the church Congar plays off against 'the Protestant zeal for

[12] Incredulous analytical philosophers of religion, as well as committed neo-Thomists, delightedly take this to mean that the existence and nature of God can be established *with certainty*, i.e. proved apodictically; whereas the text is affirming, against 'traditionalism' ('fideism'), only that God can *certainly* be known, independently of divine self-revelation, without specifying how: see Lawrence Moonan, '. . . *certo cognosci posse*: What precisely did Vatican I define?', *Annuarium Historiae Conciliorum* 42 (2010): 193-202.

[13] In his later years, if he went to church on a Sunday, Barth favoured Bruder Klaus church in Basel, where he was pleased to find Mass not celebrated *ad orientem.*

[14] Barth, who died on 10 December 1968, gave his last lecture on Ash Wednesday that year, in tandem with Balthasar: 'The Church in Renewal' (Barth) and 'Unification in Christ' (Balthasar).

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purity', which supposedly involves 'a segregation of the divine from the creaturely', and that in turn allegedly inhibits grasp of 'the plenitude of God's self-communication'. As Webster unfolds Congar's case, patiently, delicately and very sympathetically, it emerges that Congar's Catholic picture of the church ruins a properly understood Christology.

Webster might have spelled out Congar's treatment of Anglican ecclesiology. For Anglicans (he held), the sacraments are just as Aquinas depicts the sacraments of the Old Law: they have no intrinsic sanctifying power in virtue of real continuity with the humanity of Christ and the Passion, as Catholic sacraments have (cf. *ST* 3a. 62.6). They constitute ('merely') a certain protestation of faith; they act ('merely') as signs representing the faith by which sinners are justified. Anglican ecclesiology 'regards the Church as an organization rather than an organism', Congar said.[15] Thank goodness for that, one can hear John Webster saying!

John Webster contributed to *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God* (2011), the splendid assembly of essays in which Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant theologians re-examine the relationship between God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and what can be discovered by pure reason. Suspected of Catholic leanings by fundamentalist Calvinists, Karl Barth famously joked that the theory of *analogia entis* (in effect the possibility of natural theology) would always stop him from becoming a Catholic (*KD* I/1, 1932). Erich Przywara (1889-1972), another Jesuit theologian, invited by Barth to take part in his Aquinas seminar at Münster in 1929, held that, while including the possibility of reasoning from the world to the existence of a creator, the analogy of being really exists in the likeness/unlikeness between creation and God.[16]

In the section of the volume dealing with how talk of the analogy of being might help in renewing theology today, Webster offers, in 'Perfection and Participation' (379-394), a serene meditation on the Letter to the Ephesians, in which we move from the dignity and freedom of human creatures as called in Christ into filial adoption, to acknowledging this filiation as grounded and fulfilled in the mystery of God revealed in Christ. Our election in Christ allows for God's freedom and goodness to be maintained simultaneously with the freedom and goodness of redeemed humanity — 'The two coexist

[15] *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion* (1939): vii.

[16] Mentor to Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, and Edith Stein among many others, Przywara is only now being recognized in the Anglo-American world as the greatest Catholic thinker of the twentieth century. This collection adds decisively to the discovery of Przywara, including as it does the most significant exponents of his work, such as John R. Betz, David Bentley Hart and Kenneth Oakes (whose doctoral research on Barth was guided by Webster at Aberdeen).

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in a mutual likeness, without rivalry, but also in a subordinated and beautiful order', as Thomas Joseph White sums up (30).

God's perfection may go with a certain participation on our part, but Webster is hesitant. Back to the Lutheran Robert Jenson: in his work it might be thought that 'creatures somehow co-constitute God' (386). Calvinist theologians are not 'unremittingly hostile' to some version of the 'metaphysics of participation', at least in soteriology and sacramental theology. They are 'open to learn', listening to critics, 'however hostile or under informed'. However, if what Barth meant was something like what may be discovered in the Letter to the Ephesians — God's goodness is beyond ontological difference — we may relax. After all, the *analogia entis* is just a 'theologoumenon' — were it the invention of the Antichrist it would surely be more destructive than this 'somewhat recherché bit of Christian teaching'.

In *Ressourcement,* an equally valuable collection, mostly by Catholic scholars, John Webster writes on '*Ressourcement* Theology and Protestantism' (482-494). He begins with Hans Urs von Balthasar's dismay in 1951 at how ignorant Catholic theologians, including Congar, were of Protestantism, with Balthasar's 'remarkable book on Barth being the exception that proves the rule' (483). The classical Reformed Scholastics made more use of patristic literature than they are given credit for — treating the Fathers, of course, only as confirming what may be found in Scripture independently of them, with no recourse to the authority of any supposed *consensus patrum.* Barth, and T.F. Torrance, for example, in *The Trinitarian Faith* (1988), did *church* dogmatics; it is nonsense to write off the Reformation tradition as 'individualistic, heretical, and negative', as happens in Louis Bouyer's 'rather bitter appraisal' (488).[17]

On the other hand, Protestantism did indeed emerge out of conflict over the nature of the church. The *ressourcement* theologians, like de Lubac and Congar, sought to retrieve an ecclesiology in which the institutional church is intrinsic to the historical economy of salvation. They were committed to ecclesial/sacramental practices, as well as to the doctrine, of the church as the Risen Christ's Mystical Body — the church as the continuation of the hypostatic union. Webster quotes Congar, the great Catholic ecumenist, writing even during the Vatican Council, that for Protestants it is 'as if Christ and the church were in a purely extrinsic relation to each other'. That could never be reconciled with Catholic ecclesiology.

[17] Louis Bouyer (1913-2004), formerly a Lutheran pastor, was a major ressourcement theologian, later with *Communio* sympathies.

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VIII

John Webster's article '*Fides et Ratio*, articles 68–76' (*New Blackfriars* March 2000: 68–76) brought protest from his Oxford colleague Thomas Weinandy OFM Cap (June: 225–235), to which he provided a brief response, conceding nothing of importance (236-237).

In the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998) Pope John Paul II reminds his fellow bishops that faith and reason are not only compatible, but belong together essentially. Faith without reason leads to superstition; reason without faith to nihilism and relativism. Webster welcomes the encyclical, 'an event of some significance far beyond the confines of Catholicism', emerging from a church leadership prepared to ask hard questions about serious intellectual matters. The tone, however, is deplorable, reminiscent of the Kremlin urging Socialist realism in the arts: 'Anglicans who cherish misty-eyed visions of universal primacy might pause and ask themselves if this really is the only alternative to near (but not total) absence of episcopal *theological* leadership'.

But Webster has more radical difficulties: 'The word of God is addressed to all people, in every age and in every part of the world, and the human being is by nature a philosopher' (art. 64). Philosophy is not one intellectual discipline alongside others: rather, human beings are by nature driven by a desire to know the ultimate truth of our existence, a desire fulfilled in the 'perennial philosophy'. This 'metaphysics of ultimacy', so Webster judges, turns out to be heavily slanted towards a phenomenology of self-transcendence: 'the curious amalgam of quasi-existentialist anthropology and transcendental metaphysics which had ascendency in some European Christian circles'. For all the Pope's praise for Thomas Aquinas, the text operates tacitly on modern (effectively Cartesian/Kantian) philosophical principles.

Moreover the text falls into line with a modern academic convention: sacred texts cannot make ultimate truth claims until they have been translated into general theory. Here Webster, rather alarmingly, detects a hermeneutical move 'from the crudities of *Vorstellung* to the better grounded and more universal *Begriff*'. Revealingly, the sub-disciplines of theology mentioned are dogmatics, fundamental theology and moral theology: *not* biblical exegesis. And, in the account of dogmatics, fundamental theology and morals, priority is obviously accorded to the speculative.

Finally, the focus on the human person as self-transcendent, 'at best imprudent in the current climate', 'at worst, potentially disruptive of the shape of Christian doctrine', goes with the absence of a strong doctrine of the Trinity. Even more dismayingly, the doctrine of sin is rarely mentioned, and only in terms of the 'inherent weakness of human reason' (art. 75), rather than in terms of 'depravity,

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idolatry, fantasy or madness (in the way that, for instance, the Christian humanist Calvin treated the depravity of reason)'. This is a 'theology without terror'.

Thomas Weinandy deplores Webster's 'dismissive attitude'. He grants that there is something in Webster's anxiety at the Pope's starting with 'man' as the 'seeker' and 'searcher of truth'. Yes, the encyclical invests too much in a transcendental/phenomenological anthropology: 'it would have been better to have started with the biblical proclamation that man is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27), a passage which is astonishingly never quoted within the encyclical and only alluded to twice'. This would have provided grounds for 'a biblical anthropology that would both support man's natural or created ability to know the truth and also define man as a hearer of the Word'.

IX

John Webster taught for some years in Toronto, ecumenically, with the Jesuit George P. Schner. He taught at Regis College, Webster at Wycliffe. They edited *Theology after Liberalism*: *A Reader* (2000). Schner died, later in 2000, aged fifty-four. *Essays Catholic and Critical*, edited by Philip G. Ziegler and Mark Husbands (2003), bring together some thirteen papers, 'the outline of what might have been', as Webster says in his nine-page introduction: 'taken together, they probe with consummate dexterity the ills of modern theology and indicate where a cure might be found' (xix).

It is as a reader of texts that Schner is first remembered by Webster — reading was 'the path to insight', not 'analysis of the transcendental conditions of human knowing' (xi), an unfair dig at Bernard Lonergan, whose essays show he too did a fair amount of reading, far outside philosophy and Aquinas. As Webster goes on to say, anyway, 'teaching is in one sense nothing other than reading in common'.

What he also liked, and highlights here, is Schner's suspicions of standard Anglo-American philosophy of religion, as it was, allegedly, 'trapped in the self-alienation of Christian intellectual articulations from the exercise of the Christian religion' (xiii). For Schner, 'in company not only with Thomas but also with Barth', philosophy should be an *ancilla theologiae*. His approach was 'a kind of historical equivalent of Wittgenstein's deconstruction of assumptions about the ways in which we deal with world in language'. A very generous account of how much Schner owed to his teachers at Yale, Louis Dupré, George Lindbeck and Hans Frei, concludes with the judgment that Frei's work especially went companionably with 'a Catholic understanding of Christianity in which Christian faith and theology are inseparable from their ecclesial embodiment in a

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tradition' (xix). Webster leaves it at that — again, however, it is a version of Christianity he would never have espoused.

X

Webster finds much to ponder in his quite lengthy review of Alyssa Lyra Pitstick's book *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (2007).[18]

'He descended into hell': famously, Hans Urs von Balthasar placed this clause of the Nicene Creed at the centre of his theology: 'it is for the sake of this day [Holy Saturday] that the Son became man' (*Mysterium Paschale* ET 1990: 49). Hints of this interpretation that Balthasar found in Scripture, patristic literature, and so on, were confirmed, he believed, by the trance-like experiences undergone on Holy Saturday by his friend the mystic Adrienne Kaegi-von Speyr.[19] In the first comprehensive treatment (the product of a doctorate supervised by Dominicans in Rome) Pitstick argues that Balthasar's thesis contradicts what the Catholic Church has traditionally taught. Her book has generated much controversy.[20]

Webster wishes that she had written a 'gentler' book. He demurs from judging her evaluation of Balthasar's Holy Saturday doctrine — excusing himself as 'a mere amateur' in Balthasar studies; but in fact he agrees with her. One among the 'many' ways of profiting from her book, however, would be to read it as a defence of the doctrine of divine perfection: 'Indeed, one of my hopes for the book is that, once the noise of battle has subsided and the wounded have been dressed and taken to shelter, we may be able to engage peaceably and constructively with some of the material dogmatic issues to which it has drawn our attention'.

There are few recent books of theology that Webster praised so highly. He highlights three immensely important dogmatic topics of interest: 'the finished' character of the redemptive work of Christ on the cross; the relation between theology and economy in the Trinity; and the hypostatic union — in all of which God's perfection features.

As regards the first Webster agrees with Pitstick: Balthasar prolongs the redemptive action beyond Calvary into Christ's descent into hell, but in 'the common catholic (*sic*) tradition', as she rightly says, 'Christ's death on the Cross is the consummation of man's

[18] *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 (2009); 202-210.

[19] Adrienne von Speyr (1902-1967), physician, married to historian Werner Kaegi, received as Catholic by Balthasar in 1940.

[20] According to Tracey Rowland, Pitstick's book is a 'hatchet job'; see her review in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, September 2008: 479-482. For a different view see John D. O'Connor OP, *New Blackfriars* November 2007: 745-7.

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objective redemption, to which the Descent does not essentially contribute, since Christ descends in consequence of His death and to bring the fruits of the accomplished redemption to those who were awaiting it in *sheol*' (Pitstick p. 66). For Balthasar, however, the descent becomes 'the continuation of the Cross as its invisible counterpart and peak' (p. 98). Thus, the *consummatum est* is seriously qualified (indeed, for Pitstick, effectively cancelled). Debate would no doubt arise, down the line, about the relation between the finished work of the Son of God on the cross and the eucharistic worship of the church. But as Webster concludes: 'The cross is a historical (and therefore metaphysical) *perfectum*: full, perfect and sufficient, as we say in the communion liturgies of my bit of the Reformation tradition' — 'though on occasions Protestants given to existentialist enthusiasms were wont to collapse the entire economy of redemption into the 'word of the cross' — a drastic foreshortening which is Christologically and soteriologically calamitous' (203). As Aquinas puts it in a key passage cited by Pitstick: 'Christ's passion was a kind of universal cause of man's salvation' (*ST* 3a 52, 1).

Secondly, as regards the Trinity, Reformed theologians (among whom Webster places himself) maintain an asymmetry between 'immanent' and 'economic' in teaching about God's triune being and acts. Barth is a complicated case, he concedes, as recent debate shows. But what is required is an account of Christian teaching in which an appreciable role is played by God's perfection, that is, 'the utter sufficiency, originality and plenitude of God's life in himself'. What is said about the economy of God's acts *ad extra* should be 'suspended' from a theology of the inner divine life in its entire blessedness. For Pitstick, Balthasar's doctrine of the Trinity is functionally, though of course not intentionally, tritheistic. With the Son's being abandoned by the Father to being dead in *sheol* Balthasar appears to read the economic event back into the immanent divine being so that it is as if 'the Trinity is experienced as being destroyed' (p. 119). Balthasar cannot affirm 'that the Son remained unchanged in heaven, possessing its bliss, even in His incarnation and passion' (p. 125). There is the loss of any sense that the humanity of the incarnate one is redemptively significant, the real engine of salvation is the Trinitarian processions; voluntarism is introduced into the doctrine of the Trinity with the Son's 'antecedent consent' to the Father; indeed, there is a hint of divine mutability and passibility (p. 133) — enough to serve as a reminder of the perils of expanding the notion of kenosis to include the *opera Dei interna* (207).

Thirdly, Webster welcome the candour with which Pitstick proposes a dogmatic 'psychology of Christ'. She reads the history of Jesus Christ in virtue of the confession of the two natures: 'As one Person in two natures, Christ always acts in accord with both His human and His divine natures. Furthermore, all His actions were

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directed to the end of making possible man's salvation, which requires faith in Jesus Christ as God. Thus, in all the works of Christ, and especially the most significant, both His humanity and His divinity may be apprehended (though sometimes one is more apparent than the other) in order that we might believe this man is God' (p. 33).

Thus Pitstick is able to describe the history of Jesus in such a way that his function in the triune economy, and that economy's relation to the life of God *in se*, steers away from the problems which have so afflicted modern Christology, 'namely that 'humanity' is more 'real' or 'basic' a quantity than 'deity', and its epistemological corollary that the humanity of the incarnate one is available for historical investigation apart from its relation to the divine Word' (cf 209). In other words, the Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures is allowed to illuminate the history of Jesus, by as it were 'keeping our gaze steady' (in Aquinas's phrase) on the mystery of his identity, above all here as regards the Passion. With Pitstick's traditional Catholic theology of Christ's descent into hell Webster agrees that, in its classical formulations, Reformed Christology too would not seek to explain the compatibility of Christ's divinity with his suffering by projecting kenosis into the being of God — that only ruins what is confessed of God's perfection (209).

XI

Of course, much more than his reading of Catholic theologians went into shaping John Webster's mature theology. In *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (2003), his beautiful account of the Bible as the triune God's communication with rational creatures, Werner Jeanrond's 'sophisticated work' (29, 95–6) and Yves Congar's 'porous' Christology (51) appear, along the lines noted above, otherwise no recent Catholic theologians nor Thomas Aquinas figure, to shape Webster's position negatively, let alone positively. In *Holiness* (2003), an equally fine book, he pays even less attention to modern or medieval Catholic theology. Webster did theology beautifully without Catholic help.

Anyway, if asked to list his debts, Webster would have placed biblical exegesis first (though exegesis is not as powerful or extensive a presence in the papers surveyed here as one might have expected). Calvin and the Reformed Scholastics figure more and more prominently as his thinking unfolds. Karl Barth is never far away. The *ressourcement* theologians Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar, whose work Webster greatly respected, play a key role in defining the picture of the nature and function of the church which he

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regarded as inherently Catholic, rightly — and for him also totally unacceptable.[21]

Conflicts in theology, as we heard him say, are not so much *within* the church but *about* the church.

However, as he considered the doctrine of creation, it was Thomas Aquinas to whom he appealed. Finally, the five-volume systematic theology that Webster planned would have been guided by Aquinas's principle of doing theology always *sub ratione Dei* — meaning of course, perhaps a little controversially, the triune God.

Whatever drafts may be publishable, Webster's conception of how to do theology bears fruit already in articles and books by theologians whose doctoral research he guided.[22] We also have a good picture in *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John Webster* edited by R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky and Justin Stratis (2015) of how his work endures.

'Christian theology is a work of *latria* and *sanctitas*', he wrote, in the Eberhard Jüngel *festschrift* (*Virtue and Intellect*: 159). In a footnote he directs the reader to *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (2007) by A.N. Williams, an 'exquisite essay' he had already said (*The Domain of the Word*: 123), one of the few Anglican theologians he really admired.[23] If we would consider 'the coherence of intellect and ascesis' in doing theology, then we should consult her book. Certainly he was reading more, more extensively and more deeply, in patristic theology. In the Jüngel essay, however, he had just quoted Thomas Aquinas: it is 'by sanctity that the human mind applies itself and its acts to God' (*ST* 2a 2ae 81,8). Where that might have led we shall never know.

Fergus Kerr OP
fergus.kerr@english.op.org

[21] Webster must have enjoyed Karl Barth's account of discussing ecclesiology with Pope Paul VI (*Ad Limina Apostolorum* 1966): for the Pope the Blessed Virgin Mary was icon of the Church, Barth preferred Joseph.

[22] *Kenotic Trajectory of the Church in Donald MacKinnon's Theology: from Galilee to Jerusalem to Galilee* by Timothy G. Connor (2011), an excellent book, emerged from doctoral research at Toronto supervised by John Webster

[23] Her essay in *Theological Theology*, 319-335: on how Denys and Juan de la Cruz are not as apophatic as people say.

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