

Review of John Webster, *God Without Measure. Working Papers in Christian Theology. Vol.1: God and the Works of God* (viii + 231pp); *Vol. 2: Virtue and Intellect* (vii + 192pp.): London, New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2016.

When I agreed to review these two volumes of John Webster's *God without Measure*, John was one of my most significant theological interlocutors. John and I were both at Oxford together, indeed both at Christ Church—though in very different positions. He was the recently appointed Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity and I was an Open Scholar undergraduate in Theology; I had in fact chosen to apply to both Oxford and Christ Church because he was going there. John not only lectured me in my first encounters with systematics and Christian doctrine, but also—walking to and from lectures from the college—provided me with an even more invaluable informal education in systematic theology. After Oxford, I went to Cambridge under the tutelage of David Ford and John moved to a chair in Aberdeen, where we were later to be colleagues for three years at the University of Aberdeen and where we taught courses together and shared in the doctoral seminar in Systematic Theology. After he moved to St Andrews, we continued to meet up, speak on the telephone and talk about the shape of Theology in the UK and our own theological projects. When I arrived at Aberdeen, John (as my senior colleague) told me what he really wanted was someone with whom he could talk and debate theology—someone who would not necessarily agree with his theological decisions and instincts, but who shared enough assumptions and spoke enough of the same theological language to make the theological conversation meaningful and straight forward. I think that nicely captures mine and John's relationship: there was a genuine commonality of approach but with different material emphases and conclusions. For both of us, Barth was an important teacher, but each of us went in quite different ways in relation to Barth's corpus—John's moving more and more towards the doctrine of God's life *in se*; my moving more to attending further to the conditions of reception of the faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. Our very last conversation, during a lunch at my house, was in fact precisely about those theological movements for each of us—still always with him as teacher and me as student.

I hope the reader will forgive such a personal reflection at the start of a review; another will also conclude it. However, shortly after I agreed to review these two volumes of his essays, John died unexpectedly and suddenly. His untimely death means it hard not to reflect on the significance of his thought and theology, especially for one who like me learned from him in so many ways and never stopped talking theology with him from the age of 17 onwards. The ideas in many of the essays contained in the two volumes of *God without Measure* were themes we discussed, particularly in relation to each of our ongoing projects. And it is hard to separate any engagement with these essays from the personal conversations, debates, seminars and discussions John and I shared over the best part of twenty years, and particularly (in relation to these books) during our time working together in Aberdeen.

In a sense, these two volumes are more important in terms of Webster's theology than the subtitle of *Working Papers in Christian Theology* might suggest. As those who have followed Webster's work will know, he had planned and was contracted to write a multi-volume systematic theology. The essays in these volumes are essays are explorations of themes

relating both to the practice of writing systematic theology and to the initial material dogmatic areas which Webster was exploring in his proposed (but sadly never completed) *Systematic Theology* volume 1. There are two comments which are worth making about this. Firstly, the importance of these 'working papers' in terms of giving clues to what Webster's systematic theology might have said cannot be over-estimated in light of his all too early death. These papers represent some of Webster's most mature theological insights and were accompanying essays to his ongoing thinking through his unpublished systematics. Second, the reason why so many of the essays in these volumes concern matters of dogmatic order, the nature of theology, and the form of theological reflection is also because they were accompanying 'working papers' to the never completed big project. These essays represent Webster's 'thinking into' the task of writing a regular and comprehensive systematic theology in the form of irregular dogmatic reflections on individual topics usually in terms of the shape systematic theology might take in relation to these material dogmatic insights. The essays are in a sense the methodological, dogmatic prolegomena to his work, and provide us with clues to the foundations Webster was laying for his approach to the execution of dogmatics.

It should go without saying that the quality and elegance of these pieces testify to John's reputation as the one of the most significant and able dogmaticians of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. His command of whole swathes of historical theology is presented with a light touch in service to his constructive purposes: this is systematic theology at its best—its most academic and its most reverential simultaneously. Anyone wanting to see how dogmatics of the highest quality is to be written would do well to invest time attending to the form, precision and careful expression of each of the essays in these two volumes. In one sense, that is what John taught a whole raft of theologians—to have confidence not only in the action of writing systematics and dogmatics, but to do so with command, exactitude and rigour in the quest for true statements about the God who is the source of all truth. For Webster, even in his critical moments, the critical task of dogmatics is not the critical breaking down of dogmatic claims, but the careful, delicate and fine explication of what it means to believe in the gospel, and to profess faith in the One God. Even the theologian furthest from John's perspective on the faith could surely not help but be impressed with the intellectual command of the dogmatic tradition of the church which is displayed in his work and the scholarly perfection with which he expresses his claims. The elegance of the presentation and argument does not, however, mean these chapters are undemanding. Not only is the reader expected to deal with the frequently quoted (and untranslated) Latin, but the reader is also often caught unawares by the complexity of what is being argued in its detail in light of the prose. While many readers will hear a forthrightness within the undoubted (and helpful) polemics in the volumes, for those of us who knew John, it is difficult to read his work without hearing the generous and winsome voice with which he always presented and talked: even if the quality and maturity of the work betrays the description of the work as 'working papers', this subtitle accords with the voice and mood in which John did theology, and the reader does well to hear the intellectual voice of one enquiring into the topics and always checked by his own dogmatic sense of the infinite plenitude of the divine life.

The essays in these volumes revolve around a constant theme that Christian theology done properly should concern first of all God's life *in se* in the immanent trinity with reflection on

divine processions and missions; and then (and strictly then) all things in relation to God—including the divine economy, Christology, creation, history. Order here is the key: God in God's own complete plenitude first and then *and only then* everything related to God; the divine life *in se* first and only subsequently the divine life *ad extra*. Students of systematic theology will be aware that this is something of a movement from the theologian most closely associated with Webster, perhaps until the last decade of his life—Karl Barth. Whereas Barth's theology (in its mature form at least) prioritised Christology and the divine economy (thinking from Christology to the doctrine of God), Webster's theological instincts in these volumes align more with Thomas than with any post-Enlightenment thinkers. Indeed, these volumes display the movement in Webster's thought from Barth (who does remain as a low-key conversation partner) to the Protestant (Reformed) scholastics and to Thomas. What is displayed in these volumes is a kind of constructive Reformed Thomism—a Reformed Scholasticism which is always generously catholic in its sensibilities and scope in service of explicating the immeasurability of God.

These themes are executed in two volumes—the first on 'God and the Works of God'; the second on 'Virtue and the Intellect'. Volume 1 considers the issue of what might be considered dogmatic topography and proportion. For Webster, correctly, the location and ordering of theological loci affects the material description and proportionate speech within them. For him, there is the recurrent theme of the manner in which the creator-creature divide functions as a controlling principle, such that there is a preoccupation with creation—not for the sake of creation in and of itself but always in relation to God as a check to remind theology of its proper task. Webster attends to the One who is Creator and to the creation only in proportionate degree to that One who Creates. Theology finds its ultimate dogmatic res in relation to God's life in itself; and all other dogmatic reflection must express itself in proportionate accordance with this principle and the ordering that results. Thus, as well as considering the general method of theology (chapter 1) and God's life in and of Godself (including Trinitarian issues, the eternal generation of the Son, the place of Christology in systematics, and the Sonship of Christ), the book also contains essays on creation, creaturely goodness, the relationship of God to creatures, providence, soteriology, justification and ecclesiology, along with a concluding chapter on 'What makes theology theological?' (chapter 14). But each of these loci outwith the doctrine of God's life in *se* is examined principally in terms of how the doctrine should be shaped by the principal and ultimate dogmatic res of divine aseity. Thus, the book is not so much an exploration of different loci of doctrine, but of the one locus of the divine life in and of itself and the effect of this on the material ordering and description of derivative doctrinal reflection (God's outer works): the book is on the doctrine of God's life in *se*, and how some of the major loci of Christian theology are shaped by the dogmatic principles set out in relation to this.

As John and I discussed on many occasions, there may be a place here for material interrogation on the sense of this proportionality he describes. Although chapter 8 does concern '*Non ex aequo*: God's Relation to Creatures', the employment of the creator-creature distinction is focused primarily on the *distinction* between God and creation—an appropriate first starting point. But surely, that very distinction is meaningful only in its relationality? There is no Creator without a creature, no creature without a Creator: there is as much relationality as distinction in the principle of *creation ex nihilo* as creation comes from nowhere but from God's free and gracious act. Although God is free to be a *se*, the

reality that we can even speak in this way determines that God is not: there is now never a time when God is without God's creature. To speak of God as Creator implies not only God's infinite otherness to creation and creation's dependence on God's grace, but also God's relationship to God's creature. Certainly, this theme is present throughout the book, but the polemic points forcibly in the direction of reminding the reader always of the ordered distinction (not simultaneity) of speaking of distinction and relationship. Hence, on the first material page of the volumes, Webster writes that theology involves the consideration of a twofold subject (in a manner which echoes Thomas). It is worth quoting him at length as herein one sees the primary programmatic approach of the volumes, which reflects this emphasis on distinction over relationality:

This object is, *first*, God in himself in the unsurpassable perfection of his *inner* being and work as Father, Son and Spirit and in his outer operations, and, *second and by derivation*, all other things relative to him. Christian divinity is characterized both by the scope of its matter—it aims at a comprehensive treatment of God and creatures—and by the *material order* of that treatment, in which *theology proper precedes and governs* economy. All things have their origin in a single transcendent animating source; a system of theology is so to be arranged that the *source*, the process of derivation and the derivatives may *in due order* become objects of contemplative and practical attention. (Vol. 1, 3, emphasis added)

It is simply unclear from scripture that such an order and sense of derivation is absolutely implied. Certainly, in the order of being, God (who is) precedes all else, and accordingly all God's ways with that which is not God are gracious. However, if theology derives itself from rational reflection upon Scripture, it is not perhaps clear that the *emphasis* of Webster's presentation affords itself the dominance in his sense of systematic proportionality one might expect: surely Scripture is the reflection of God (who is complete in Godself)'s gracious *relationship* to all that is not God? Certainly, no-one reading Webster's work could come away thinking anything other than this, but the question is whether there is proportionate attention to and emphasis on the relationship as well as (and perhaps it needs to be over) the distinction and the divine life in se within the polemics.

Volume 2 moves from a focus on God and God's outer workings to further his mode of argumentation in relation to moral theology, laying out the 'first principles of moral science' (Volume 2, 1). Again, the focus is God in and of Godself, and moral and intellectual issues in relation to that focus—that is, 'under the aspect of their origin and end in God' or '*sub ratio Dei*' (Volume 2, 1). There is a forcefully theological approach, therefore, to all the topics considered within the book—a theocentric articulation of the dispositions, practices and intellectual form of the faith. Chapters within the volume concern Christology and ethics, the dignity of creatures, mercy, sorrow, courage, mortification and vivification, sins of speech, intellectual life, the place of theology in the university, and intellectual patience. The meta-ethical reflection dispersed across doctrinal loci (but always ordered towards the primary foundational res of God's life in se) sets—for want of a better description—the moral conditions for theological enquiry. There is certainly a focus on the intellectual pursuit of theology in relation to the ethical and moral issues described. There is once again a *ressourcement* of earlier scholastic theological perspectives to refocus all theological reflection (including moral reflection) back onto God's own life. This clarion call is

particularly helpful in relation to tropes in which contemporary intellectual vogues or themes can come to dominate. Although the force of the argument is gentler in this second volume, once again, in friendly interrogation, one might ask a similar question to the one posed to volume one. Given the focus on the divine life, one might ask: how much this ground work can yield on the ground? Theology is inevitably abstract, and the call to focus on God in relation to moral science is wise; but I wonder how some of this material might 'land' in terms of description of the covenantal relationship of God with God's creatures. The focus on God in *se* once more moves the discussion back to God even in an account of the moral actions of creatures, and perhaps a greater focus on the *relationship* of God with God's creatures from the perspective of lived life in its spatio-temporal realities might aid the reader. This is not a material critique of the content of these essays but a request for more (a request which sadly will never be able to be met): what forms in practice should the lives and intellects of the faithful take? The church and the believer would have been well served by more from Webster relating his work to the realities of creaturely existence in the creaturely conditions which God in God's faithful and providential grace has set.

The quality of these volumes can never be in any doubt. Any theologian would do well to read these outstandingly good theological volumes: Webster was a giant of contemporary theology. Reading these essays, one cannot help but call to mind Hamlet's words: 'He was a man take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again'. A deep Christian thinker, Webster pushes the reader time and time again not to limit the plenitude of the divine life, and not to allow that plenitude to be an excuse for imprecise thinking or silence. A lucid writer, he calls the theologian with clarion clarity to focus on God, and to think about God with all the intellectual power it has as its mind is illuminated by grace. Every theologian will be educated through reading Webster's work—not only in the material content but also by virtue of learning what theological writing of the highest quality resembles. It is in the light of this over-arching judgement that the above interrogations are offered, and that the following final friendly observations are made.

First, it is ironic that someone who is associated most powerfully with the call to pursue regular dogmatics in light of the divine life in *se* in the end called theology to do this through irregular dogmatic enquiry and entry into debate. By this is meant that it is interesting even in these volumes (which certainly cohere materially and formally) Webster as one who called systematics back to its regular task will be known to posterity in the end in terms of his chief contribution as an essayist: like many other books of his, these two volumes are a collection of essays. The essays stand alone, but (for want of a better description) cohere more in relation to the polemics they offer—not in the negative sense of polemics, but in a positive sense of a prophetic setting an agenda. The revival in systematic theology in the late twentieth and early twenty first century would not have been possible without Webster's involvement, interjections, call, and critiques. These calls took the form of irregular dogmatics, calling us to the task of regular dogmatics—a task now passed on to the future generation. In this, he has set the form of the discipline as much as the material determination of the topics of theology: systematic theology is much more confident today because of Webster's insistence we can engage with deep intellectual rigour in speaking about '*God without Measure*'. When I was an undergraduate student under John's (largely informal) tutelage, John seemed a lone figure. Twenty years on, there are many, many theologians who are able to engage in systematics and dogmatics in a constructive and

classical way, and we are all indebted to John's irregular intervention into theology for the cause of regular dogmatics. *God without Measure* is the most mature version of John's intervention into the theological community with regard to the task it should be undertaking.

Second, the maturity of Webster's work in these volumes also shows a move away from his earlier more Barthian theological concerns. There is certainly a trajectory in Webster's work from Jünger and even Post-Liberalism to Barth to the Protestant scholastics to (latterly) Thomas. Readers of these volumes will not find work which outright contradicts his earlier thought, but will find more pronounced emphases in Webster's work, particularly in relation to the significance of the divine life in se and in relation to the place of reason. It is perhaps for this reason as much as any we will regret not having the mature systematics from John. I cannot help but read his work with its focus on the divine life in se and wonder what a full exposition of his position would look like in a post-Kantian theological context. There, again, exists an interrogation into his focus and emphasis on the creator-creature divide (rather than relationality): what does a fully articulated system which offers the proportionality Webster advocates look like, and how biblical is it when one considers the extent to which the Bible concerns not God in Godself but God in God's economy, in God's relationship to the creation and people with which God covenants?

This leads to my third and final observation about the volumes: how biblically orientated are they in the end? I cannot but agree with Webster that there is an inevitable intellectual abstraction involved in systematic theology: systematics is not biblical studies, and systematicians would do well to avail themselves of the work of biblical scholars rather than presume to take their place. Certainly, the focus of systematics is always going to be the *sensus plenior* of Scripture as we seek to offer light codas to aid the reading of Scripture—codas which themselves arise from reading Scripture together with the tradition rationally for today's church and world. However, I wonder sometimes how much Scripture's message is presumed in its univocity rather than argued for. As with the fathers and Thomas, there is a depth of scriptural reasoning in Webster's work which is difficult at times to uncover: one knows it is there, but there is little *close* attention to Scripture in terms of either exegesis or hermeneutics. Certainly, systematics requires conceptualisation and a degree of over-view, but I wonder how much the impetus of Webster's dominant principle is borne out by the Scriptures which testify to God's *relationship* to creation far more in terms of proportion than to God's life in se.

These last two reflections were points which John and I discussed in different ways for almost two decades. This review is my last chance to pose questions to my old colleague, mentor, teacher, and (I am honoured to say) friend. No doubt John is now putting the angels right as he glories in the known reality of his radical, persuasive and driven convictions that due proportion ought to be given to the celebration of God in whose presence John now is and who John continues to contemplate as he now knows God face to face. I shall have to put off our debates and discussions now until hopefully I join John in the God who is the ends (as he tirelessly reminded us) of all creaturely existence. For those of us who wish to see dimly through a mirror what John now sees face to face, we would do far worse in finding some clarity of vision than by reading his two volumes of *God without Measure*.