

Book reviews

doi:[10.1017/S0036930616000600](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930616000600)

John Webster, *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, 2 vols. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), pp. vii + 231. £65.00 (vol. 1); vii + 192. £65.00 (vol. 2).

John Webster's work was long-invested in showing how Christian theology retains its *theological* character. In 1997, when he took the post of Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, he sketched this investment in his inaugural lecture, 'Theological Theology'. There he outlined the ways in which modern theology found itself performing its tasks indebted to habits of mind quite foreign to itself. It was no longer the case that Christian theology's internal logic, orienting principles and virtues of mind were chiefly responsible for setting its course and evaluating its progress. Theological disciplines had been 'de-regionalized', Webster argued, 'pressed to give an account of themselves in terms drawn largely from fields of enquiry other than theology'. That lecture marked out a set of problems towards which Webster set himself the last twenty years. Addressing those problems took the form of constructive dogmatics: portraying the beauty of the gospel as the outward movement of mercy and grace sourced in the utterly sufficient and complete life of the triune God.

Webster's style of constructive dogmatics was rarely polemical – though he was never one to pull a punch. Rather, the form of argument was most frequently *careful description*. In an essay included in this collection he wrote, 'Theology has to describe the gospel well, and to persuade by description. In terms of its speech before the world, therefore, theology simply speaks the gospel and leaves the gospel to look after itself' (vol. 2, p. 50). He calls it elsewhere, 'doctrinal portraiture'. Argumentation is only incidental to the task of good dogmatics: 'to unleash doctrines and let them run, to allow them to explicate themselves with the assistance of a conceptual vocabulary and a measure of systematic orientation' (vol. 1, p. 30).

Conceptual vocabulary and systematic orientation are useful *only* as 'the instruments of spiritual apprehension' (vol. 1, p. 27). Whatever else the theologian might say about God's interaction with the world (his outer works), she must first – *diligently* and *cheerfully* – give her attention to God's life in himself. For Webster this was a corrective to so much that goes wrong in Christian thought, not least of which the migration of theology away from the praise of God. In every era, no less ours, theologians are prone to slip

from the doxological register into speculation. But when their attention is trained again and again back onto God, then the distance shortens between the work of sanctified reason and praise. 'If Christian dogmatics wishes to offer a corrective, it can only be by recalling itself to its proper calling, which is the praise of God by crafting concepts to turn the mind to the divine splendor' (ibid.).

All this prologue is merely to accentuate the level of consistency one finds across Webster's career, and no less across the essays in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*. The essays in volume 1, *God and the Works of God*, centre on God and his economy and are divided into two parts. In the first part, 'God in Himself', four essays concern theology proper: the divine life in se (aseity, processions, and two on christology). The eight essays in the second part, 'God's Outer Works', take up God's works in creation, providence and the history of grace. The division follows the formal definition of theology that guides Webster from one essay to the next: theology is concerned first with God, and then with all things in relation to God. It's a classic definition to be sure, but its first part, 'God', requires no small amount of patience. Indeed, to dwell on the divine nature and persons, their processions and eternal relations, requires a degree of patience that Webster argues is necessary to ground all that follows.

The theologian's patience is required, in part, because she is concerned with 'invisible things' (vol. 1, p. 6). Even when the works of God and its effects present themselves to her senses, she must, Webster insists, have the patience and courage to follow them further back to the divine life itself. 'God's outer works are most fully understood as loving and purposive,' he repeatedly insists, 'when set against the background of his utter sufficiency' (vol. 1, p. 6; emphasis mine). Again, 'We do not understand the economy unless we take time to consider God who is, though creatures might not have been' (vol. 1, p. 86). And again, 'The nature of God's works *ad extra* cannot be grasped without immediate reference to God's intrinsic self-satisfaction which is their principle or ground' (vol. 1, p. 214).

Whereas some recent theology is impatient with first principles and worried over conceptual abstraction, Webster appears aware but *untroubled*. Like a musical theme and variation, in these essays a vision of theology's telos reappears time and again: the movement of the regenerate mind towards the resplendently complete triune life. Thus, where does one go to consider the shape of any particular Christian doctrine? To the doctrine of the Trinity, and further in to the doctrine of the divine processions. There one finds the backdrop against which the outer works of God are properly understood as the actions of this God. Relations of origin among the divine persons are not hopeless abstractions but, Webster avers, 'a way of articulating the infinite

depth within the being of God, that ocean whose tide is the missions of the Son and the Spirit by which lost creatures are redeemed and perfected' (vol. 1, p. 41).

From one essay to the next Webster funds whatever doctrine he takes in hand by contentedly returning to the doctrine of the Trinity and the divine processions. For instance, the doctrine of providence must 'begin far back in the doctrine of God – not simply with, for example, divine power or intelligence but with God's complete inner life which he is from and in himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, that is, with the eternal plenitude of the divine processions in which consists the divine blessedness. Providence is an aspect of the uncaused wonder of the overflow of God's abundant life' (vol. 1, p. 135). Then he repeats the move with soteriology, justification and ecclesiology (chapters 10–12). In each case the move is, first, backward to 'God's boundless immanent life' (vol. 1, p. 146) and only then forward to the material content of the doctrine and the manner in which it directs Christian obedience.

The same method guides the essays of volume 2, *Virtue and Intellect*. This may surprise, given they consider the moral and intellectual acts of creatures – how could God's inner life illumine the moral life? 'Practical-moral theology has a retrospective moment,' Webster explains, 'because answers to the question "what shall we do?" draw upon an understanding of who "we" are, and therefore upon what is said about God and God's works.' Moral theology must, then, not rush to practice but 'pause long and lovingly over God and created moral being' (vol. 2, p. 3). Theological intelligence gives itself first to God and only after to everything in relation to God. The moral life of the regenerate is in view but as it is comprehended according to the origin and ends of creaturely life. Those origins and ends can only be properly comprehended against the backdrop of God's overflowing inner sufficiency. For example, when explicating the virtue of mercy, Webster writes, 'we need to start very far back indeed, ultimately with teaching about the Trinity, proximately with teaching about the incarnation of the Word'. This is no metaphysical abstraction or unnecessary delay but 'essential to discovering the moral texture of the world and our own identities as agents in the world' (vol. 2, p. 52). The same moves direct his treatment of the Christian life as mortification and vivification (chapter 7) and his theology of the intellectual life (chapter 9).

This approach to theological intelligence – its practices, norms and virtues – was once normative but lost prestige. Webster's entire project is a theology of *retrieval*, which he elsewhere calls an 'attitude of mind', in which resources from the past are found distinctly advantageous for the present. Throughout these essays he traces his way from Barth back through post-Reformation

Protestants like Owen and Turretin, further back into the thought of Calvin, and then into the deep reservoir of Thomas Aquinas (he appears most frequently). And then further back still, Aquinas and the post-Reformation scholastics form a kind of lens through which Webster appropriates resources from the church fathers (most often Chrysostom, Hillary, and Augustine).

Taken together the essays in *God Without Measure* read like a template for a multivolume systematic theology. This was not accidental, for Webster had for some time planned to begin one. The final essay of volume 1, 'What Makes Theology Theological?', gives the impression of the author composing himself, taking a deep breath before launching out. His death last year makes his closing remarks in the essay all the more poignant. Commenting on topics he was unable to address, he remarks, 'Had we but world enough and time . . . ' (p. 224).

Following his death such remarks are painful to read, but not without hope. 'Theology', we should remember, 'is oriented chiefly to invisible things, "things that are unseen" (2 Cor 4:18)' (vol. 1, p. 6). This is as it should be, for faith is the particular form of seeing native to the Christian life. But it will not always be so. In glory we will stand in the presence of God and share in his life. This was his hope. As we grieve Webster's death, we should praise God in the same breath that what he saw by faith he now has by sight.

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doi:[10.1017/S0036930616000508](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930616000508)

Alasdair Raffe, *The Culture of Controversy: Religious Arguments in Scotland 1660–1714*. Studies in Modern Religious History 28 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), pp. xvi + 289, index + maps. £60.00.

Alasdair Raffe's study of Scottish religious culture across the turn of the eighteenth century makes an important contribution to our understanding of Scottish religious and controversial culture in this period. Based on work originally undertaken for his doctorate, this book represents the fruits of a decade of engagement of this critical period in Scottish church history which saw the confirmation of Presbyterian order in the Church of Scotland and with it the emergence of both Episcopalianism and dissenting forms of Presbyterianism. By taking as his period the entirety of the later Stuart monarchy, from the Restoration in 1660 to the death of Queen Anne in