

## Jordan Senner, *John Webster: The Shape and Development of his Theology*

(New York: T&T Clark, 2022), pp. ix + 202. \$115.00

Brad East

Abilene Christian University, Abilene, TX, USA ([bx03a@acu.edu](mailto:bx03a@acu.edu))

When John Webster passed away unexpectedly in 2016, the world of theology suffered a great loss. Not yet 61 years old, Webster had earned an international reputation as one of the great theological minds of his generation; his forthcoming multivolume systematic theology was widely anticipated as a major event in the Christian academy. We will never know what he would have ended up writing. But we still have some thirty-five years' worth of his scholarship to receive, interpret and learn from. Jordan Senner's new monograph is an outstanding beginning to this task.

Not that there have been no soundings in the secondary literature. Senner, though, has the distinct privilege of publishing the first book-length treatment of Webster's thought. Nor is it merely an exposition. It is an argument concerning the *development* of that thought over the course of Webster's career. For anyone who wants to understand Webster or to extend his project, Senner's work is an essential read.

Senner spies a through-line in Webster's theological vision: namely, the Creator-creature relation. What changes of mind occur – and they do occur – spiral around this singular question, informing and at times transforming Webster's approach to central Christian doctrines. Framed as a quest, Webster-per-Senner sought across his work 'to articulate *a theologically grounded and ordered account of the relation-in-distinction between God and creatures*: theologically "grounded" because he wanted to let the doctrines of the Christian faith do real intellectual work, and theologically "ordered" because he sought to think through theological questions and topics from the standpoint of a "material center" (p. 179). This 'material center' is also a 'heuristic key', both for Christian theology as such and for Webster's own theology (p. 2). Senner tracks two major shifts here: *from* christocentric *to* trinitarian; then *from* trinitarian *to* theocentric. The utility of the heuristic lies in its ability to explain as well as illuminate Webster's work from the early 1980s to its untimely end in the late 2010s.

It is important to understand what Senner means by these shifts. He doesn't mean that Webster leaves behind a belief in Christ's centrality for faith, much less that Webster's mature theology is no longer trinitarian. Instead, the trajectory as a whole is characterised by successive doctrinal emphases that Webster comes to find inadequate to the theological task. Having earlier presented the gospel primarily in terms of the incarnation, Webster begins to root the incarnation in the undivided will and action of the Holy Trinity; having done this, he then roots the triune missions *ad extra* in the triune processions *ad intra*. That is, he sees that, absent a rich account of the perfect plenitude of God *in se*, the work of grace in the economy is unstable, lacking a sure ground in the infinite divine life, which is necessary to establish the gratuity and effective power of grace. In a word, promeity presupposes aseity; without the latter, the former collapses.

Senner traces this crucial development across four basic areas of Webster's thought: christology, ecclesiology, bibliology and the task of theology itself. He dedicates a

chapter to each, and in each chapter the sequence is the same: from early (mid-1990s) to mature (mid-2010s), with a process of transition in between (mid-2000s). The process is granular but, for just that reason, demonstrates Senner's thesis. Aside from minor disagreements on the margins, I can't imagine many admirers of Webster's work finding much to dispute here.

The book lacks either a constructive or a critical component, however, and at times Senner is a bit too defensive on Webster's behalf, which results in occasional special pleading and question-begging. Senner therefore does not settle any questions for the future reception of Webster but rather sets the conditions for it. In doing so, his work raises two important questions.

First, *whither Barthian theology?* Senner rightly makes much of the shift from Barth to Aquinas in Webster's thought, a shift with wider resonance in the field over the last decade or two. Barthian scholasticism, like neo-Hegelian social trinitarianism, appears to be on the wane. Should readers of Webster follow this trend? If so, what to do with so much of Webster's early writing, saturated in Barth's ideas and language as it is? If *he* became dissatisfied with it, ought we be too?

Second, *whither Protestant theology?* It is true that, in addition to patristic and medieval theologians, the late Webster also turned to Lutheran scholastics and the Reformed orthodox. Nevertheless the sharp lines that mark Webster's earlier writing as decidedly *not* Roman or Eastern become undeniably blurry in his final publications. Colleagues like Bruce McCormack were not wrong to register anxiety at this point. Was Webster's theology moving toward a Catholic destination? For those who would learn from him, what would it mean to continue walking in the same direction?

The final impression of Senner's book is just how much Webster's thinking changed over the years. Given the confidence of Webster's rhetoric in all his writing, this may come to some as a shock. But Webster's evolution manifests a strength, not a weakness. His life, so 'God-intoxicated' (as Katherine Sonderegger has put it), was one long sustained act of faith seeking understanding. As he never failed to insist, such understanding is never complete in this life. The upshot, for such a profound and creative thinker, is ironic but fitting: an overarching movement from originality to *unoriginality*. Nor is such a remark an insult. In theology, as Webster well knew, there is no higher compliment.

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## **Brent Waters, *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues: Christian Ethics for Everyday Life***

**(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), pp. xv + 268. \$27.99**

Bryan Ellrod

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC, USA ([ellrodb@wfu.edu](mailto:ellrodb@wfu.edu))

'It is in the mundane, mind-numbing, boring, and tedious chores of taking care of ourselves and others that we catch glimpses of what God created us to be' (p. 11). From this