

## JOHN WEBSTER AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A REFORMED THOMISM

By Craig A. Carter<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Why are North American Evangelicals suddenly interested in the thought of Thomas Aquinas? And what does the theology of John Webster have to do with it? The purpose of this essay is to try to answer these two questions. The growing interest in Thomas is evident today among conservative Evangelical theologians and conservative confessional ones.*

**Key Words:** John Webster, Reformed Thomism, Scholasticism

### INTRODUCTION

The division of North American Protestantism into liberal and evangelical streams during the first half of the twentieth century has shaped Protestantism to this day. However, two current trends are complicating matters further. First, liberal Protestant denominations are dying. Not only are they in serious numerical decline, but they also have increasingly lost touch with traditional, orthodox doctrine. As they become increasingly post-Christian, they show signs of having been infected with gnostic heresy and neo-paganism. Second, Evangelicalism itself is going through a sorting process, as it divides into one stream that follows the liberal Protestant church's descent into cultural accommodation and a second stream consisting of conservative Protestants who are making the uncomfortable discovery that they do not possess the historical and philosophical resources needed to nurture historic, catholic orthodoxy. Those who view liberal Protestantism as a disaster are highly motivated to seek a deeper understanding of the tradition and to re-consider the issue of whether classical metaphysics might need to be reclaimed if we are going to succeed in maintaining Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy.

John Webster is significant to the latter group because he was a first-rate theological mind and a leading Barthian who moved away from Barth in the final phase of his career to embrace a classical theist and, specifically, Thomistic understanding of the doctrine of God. Many conservative Protestants have done doctorates on Barth in the last 40 years, many of which were supervised by Webster. Barth has been viewed as the closest modern theologian to Evangelical theology. But in the final decade of his life, Webster utilized various Thomistic metaphysical doctrines to elucidate a reformed

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version of the classic doctrine of God. He did this in the context of delving deeper into the classical roots of historic Protestantism. Thus, he raises the question of whether Barth should be regarded as a source for Evangelical theology or whether it is necessary to go back behind Barth to scholastic orthodoxy. Since Webster's death in 2016, a growing number of Evangelical theologians have concluded that we need to reach back behind Barth and the Enlightenment to recover Thomas Aquinas and reformed scholasticism.

Evangelicals have learned from Webster that the way to guard catholic orthodoxy is to recover our sixteenth and seventeenth-century roots in Reformed and Lutheran scholasticism. This premodern theological tradition produced the great Protestant confessions of faith, which build upon the ecumenical creeds of the first five centuries that symbolize trinitarian and christological orthodoxy. Webster's reading of John Owen was followed by his recovery of Thomas, which is an example of becoming more catholic by becoming more Protestant. Many younger conservative Evangelicals are following the path blazed by Webster and are beginning to recover Thomistic metaphysics in a more systematic way than he did.

#### *Evangelicals Re-discover Their Need for Roots*

The twentieth century witnessed a near-eclipse of classical metaphysics throughout Protestantism. Since Hume and Kant, most liberal Protestant theologians have started from the assumption that classical metaphysics is outdated and, therefore, we must re-state doctrine within a post-Kantian or even post-metaphysical situation. This has led to a plethora of approaches. Many Evangelical theologians have followed Barth in attempting to base theology on Christology alone, thus trying to make do without metaphysics. Cornelius Van Til has convinced many conservative Baptists and Presbyterians to reject natural theology and classical metaphysics and adopt what he termed "presuppositionalism." Neo-Calvinists in the Dutch tradition have tended to avoid talking about metaphysics by adopting the post-Kantian language of worldview (*Weltanschauung*) instead. Many Evangelicals take a Biblicist approach, which denies that we need to use any extra-biblical language to do theology and thus tends to reduce systematic theology to biblical theology. All these movements tend to place less emphasis on the ecumenical creeds and the Protestant confessions and more on *individual* biblical exegesis.

At first, the anti-metaphysical, Biblicist emphasis appeared to be successful in preserving orthodoxy. But more recently, serious concerns have surfaced. For example, in the mid-1990s and early 2000, the Evangelical Theological Society was embroiled in the open theism controversy. Open theism is a Biblicist doctrine that sees the future as truly open or undetermined, even for God. God is love, and evil is a result of his decision not to be fully in control of creation.<sup>2</sup> There was a failed attempt to expel

<sup>2</sup> See Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001) and Clark H. Pinnock, et. al. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

Clark Pinnock and John Sanders from the Society for their views. Still, many Evangelicals became aware that all Evangelical theologians did not hold classical theism.

In 2016, a controversy arose within Evangelicalism over some alarming revisions to the doctrine of the Trinity proposed by Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware, among others, which seemed to introduce an act of voluntary submission of the Son to the Father into the eternal Trinity.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, various Evangelical theologians were questioning the biblical basis of the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son,<sup>4</sup> and others were dabbling in a kind of theistic mutualism, which advocated for seeing change in God in response to the creation as well as change in creation in response to God.<sup>5</sup> The realization that temporality and change were being introduced into the being of the Triune God set off alarm bells, and questions began to arise as to whether late twentieth-century North American theology had lost touch with the ecumenical creeds and the patristic trinitarian and christological consensus, which had grounded the church for 1500 years.

In the wake of these controversies, many Evangelical theologians, including many younger ones, have become highly concerned about the shallow historical roots of recent Protestant theology. Sessions on the retrieval of patristic and medieval thought have proliferated and been well-attended at the Evangelical Theological Society in recent years. The revisionist project of attempting to re-state orthodox theology within the philosophical constraints of post-Kantian modernity has been deemed to have fallen short of the goal of preserving historic Nicene orthodoxy. As a result, many Evangelical theologians have become interested in retrieval, of which three branches are significant.

One branch seeks to retrieve the patristic consensus on the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology, focusing on the pro-Nicene theology of the fourth century and the Trinitarian thought of Augustine.<sup>6</sup> A second branch sees the thought of Thomas Aquinas as a classic re-statement of the patristic consensus on the doctrine of God and as a model for the judicious use of metaphysics in theology.<sup>7</sup> A third branch is interested in retrieving the roots

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020). See my review, "How Then Shall We Theologize? A review of Grudem's *Systematic Theology* and his doctrine of the Trinity" *Credo Magazine* (Vol. 11. Issue 1, April 2021) <https://credomag.com/article/how-then-shall-we-theologize/>.

<sup>4</sup> For a good overview of this issue, see Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (eds.), *Retrieving Eternal Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Dolezal, James E. *All That is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Heritage Books, 2017), chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> The literature is extensive but see especially Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and M. R. Barnes, *Augustine and Nicene Theology: Essays on Augustine and the Latin Argument for Nicaea* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023). Matthew Barrett has distilled much of this retrieval project for a more popular audience in his: *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> For examples see: Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics and the Task of Christian Theology. Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2019),

of Protestant theology in post-Reformation orthodoxy, that is, the theology of writers like Vermigli, Zanchi, Junius, Gerhardt, Cranmer, Owen, and Turretin, which shaped the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican confessions like the Augsburg Confession, the Westminster standards, and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.<sup>8</sup>

The recognition that contemporary systematic theology needs to be nourished by continual engagement with the tradition of historic orthodoxy is a hopeful sign of the maturing of an ecclesial movement often known more for emotional revivalism and activism than for serious scholarship outside the areas of biblical languages and exegesis. It is important to emphasize that what I am describing here is not just an academic activity that is disconnected from the spiritual life of the local church. Rather, it is being carried out mainly in church-oriented seminaries by theologians immersed in the life of local congregations and who frequently speak directly to pastors and students. It is thus more ecclesial than most systematic theology has been during the twentieth century.

In support of this retrieval project, there has also been a growing resistance to certain caricatures of the Reformation that have been popular within certain Roman Catholic and Radical Orthodox circles. The Reformation has been portrayed as a key catalyst of modernity, a transmitter of the virus of nominalism, and a harbinger of the Enlightenment. However, the research of the last two generations of scholars of the Reformation has called this set of characterizations into serious question. The work of intellectual historians such as Heiko Oberman, David Steinmetz, and Richard Muller has stressed that the stated goals of the reformers were not to disdain tradition or to abandon catholicity as a key mark of the church. Rather, it was to strive to be *more catholic than Rome* in the sense of using earlier tradition to overturn later tradition. The reformers were highly critical of late medieval scholasticism but appreciative of earlier Augustinian-Thomist scholasticism. The goal of the Reformation was to reform the existing church, not to start a new one. The main issues in dispute between the reformers and Rome were soteriology and ecclesiology, but the doctrines of God and Christ remained unchallenged. The reformers advocated *sola Scriptura* to make the point that Scripture is the final court of appeal when strands of traditions clash, but they were not interested in rejecting tradition *per se* and embracing a *solo Scriptura* that uses Scripture alone while ignoring tradition as if it were unimportant.

The first and second-generation of Protestant theologians distinguished between the Augustinian-Thomist strand of medieval scholasticism, which they often referred to as the work of the “sounder scholastics,” and the late medieval scholasticism of Occam and Biel, characterized by nominalism,

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Jordan Cooper, *Prolegomena: A Defense of Scholastic Method* (Weidner Institute, 2020), Christopher R. J. Holmes *The Holy Spirit, New Studies in Dogmatics*, eds. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016) and Fred Sanders *The Triune God. New Studies in Dogmatics*, eds. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 volumes, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

voluntarism, univocity, and semi-Pelagianism. The well-known invective of Luther against Thomas is now understood to be based on Luther's emphatic rejection of the teachings of Gabriel Biel, whose writings served as his textbooks during his formation and whose misrepresentations of the thought of Thomas led Luther to criticize ideas he mistakenly attributed to Thomas. This is why Lutheran scholasticism was able to appropriate so much from Thomas without necessarily conflicting with Luther. Calvin was not trained in scholastic theology and appears to have known Thomas's writings only second-hand. When he refers negatively to "the scholastics," he has in mind the work of the scholastic theologians of his day, especially those at the University of Paris who were nominalists and far from faithful disciples of Thomas. Other important reformers like Peter Martyr Vermigli and Martin Bucer had first-hand knowledge of Thomas and appreciated many of his ideas. By the second generation of the Reformation, Protestant scholasticism was utilizing many ideas from Thomas in the universities in Lutheran and Reformed territories where philosophy and doctrine were taught.

Much research on the intellectual origins of the Reformation has been synthesized and documented in an important book published in May 2024 by Matthew Barrett, titled: *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church*.<sup>9</sup> This thousand-page tome offers a new reading of the Reformation that attempts to get as close as possible to the self-understanding of its leaders. Significantly, Part I of this book devotes 350 pages to medieval theology and is titled "The Reformation's Catholic Context." Chapter five's title conveys a centrally important theme of the book: "The *Via Moderna*, Nominalism, and the Late Medieval Departure from the Realism of Thomistic Augustinianism and Its Soteriology." Bruce Gordon of Yale Divinity School says of this book that it is "a crucial corrective to a historical tradition that has lost its sense of self."<sup>10</sup> Evangelicalism, or at least a segment of it, seems now to be recovering its sense of being catholic precisely by recovering the true meaning of what it means to be historically Protestant.

All three of these branches of the retrieval project, pro-Nicene theology, Thomistic theology and philosophy, and Protestant scholasticism, are interconnected. One significant focus of attention has been the question of what we today can learn from the use of Thomistic metaphysics by the post-Reformation Protestant scholastics in their articulation of the doctrine of God. How did the reformers and post-reformation Protestant theologians utilize metaphysics in writing their doctrinal systems? To what extent did the classical metaphysical commitments of writers like Vermigli, Gerhardt, Owen, and Turretin shape the doctrine found in the major Protestant confessions such as the *Westminster Standards*, the *Augsburg Confession*, the

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Barrett. *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. back cover.

*Thirty-Nine Articles*, and the *London Baptist Confession*? Is it possible that the classical realist metaphysics they held were indispensable to the coherent statement of Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy they taught? To what extent did Protestant scholastics utilize the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas? These questions are now the subject of intense investigation.

I suggest that it is possible to employ the term “Reformed Thomism” to designate a growing and vigorous strand of Evangelical dogmatics that can be seen in the works of scholars such as James Dolezal, Steven Duby, Christopher Holmes, Carl Trueman, Scott Swain, Michael Allen, J. V. Fesko, and Matthew Barrett. Some of these figures might be happy to be known as part of a school of Reformed Thomism, while others might be more comfortable being known as friends of such a movement. And, of course, it is early enough in the development of this movement that a different term might yet come to the fore as more appropriate.

Nevertheless, the term “Reformed Thomism” has been used in a recent dissertation written under Matthew Barrett’s supervision at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. I believe it captures two aspects of this retrieval movement quite well. First, it is a movement of mostly reformed theologians in the Presbyterian, Anglican, and Baptist traditions. So, it is embedded in historic, reformed theology. Second, it is Thomistic in the sense that it draws on both the philosophy and the theology proper of Thomas extensively. It uses metaphysics in a ministerial role as a handmaiden to theology rather than seeking to express doctrine through the grid of one pre-existing philosophical system. In so doing, it follows the example of Thomas himself. Major Thomistic themes treated favorably in most of these authors include natural theology, metaphysical realism, the importance of Divine ideas, the use of analogical language for God, a participatory ontology, premodern christological exegesis, and the harmony of faith and reason. Theologians who share these emphases have their own internal disagreements, but they are moving on a trajectory that is quite different from those of other theological movements within Evangelicalism, such as analytic theology, Van Tilian presuppositionalism, Barthianism, and left-wing, social justice-oriented movements.

#### *John Webster’s Influence on the Growth of Reformed Thomism*

A significant influence on many of those mentioned above is the late Anglican theologian, John Webster. How has Webster’s work influenced Reformed Thomism? As one of the greatest theologians of his generation, his example is an inspiration to many.

In the final decade of his life, Webster had moved well beyond Barthianism and was engaging classical Protestant theologians such as Herman Bavinck and John Owen. In his reading of Owen, Webster was directed back to the thought of Thomas Aquinas. In a recent book, *John Webster: The Shape and Development of His Theology*, Jordan Senner has argued that we can discern

three periods in Webster's writings rather than two.<sup>11</sup> Throughout his career, he focused on how to articulate theologically the God-man relationship. In his earliest work, which could be termed Barthian, his starting point was Christology. But in his second phase, he began to stress the economic Trinity, that is, the historical self-revelation of God in history, as his starting point. In his third phase, from about 2007 up to his death in 2016, he began to think through the implications of starting the exposition of the doctrine of God from God in himself, that is, from the immanent Trinity. One of the most important influences on his thinking during this third period was the writings of Thomas Aquinas.

He began to differentiate between the order of discovery, in which the Spirit empowers us to know the Son, who directs us up to the Father, and the order of exposition, in which a properly ordered dogmatics begins from the being of God and then explicates the processions and missions of the one God. He was starting to espouse a provocatively non-modern, even anti-modern, approach. Clearly, in this final decade of his life, Webster had adopted a premodern starting point for dogmatics that took a different approach to dealing with the Kantian strictures on doing classical metaphysics from that of his mentor Barth. Whereas Barth attempted to do an end run around Kant by grounding all dogmatics in a narrative Christology, Webster simply refused to accept the metaphysical constraints of Kant and grounded his dogmatics in the Divine being itself, in full awareness that doing so requires one to adopt many aspects of premodern, classical metaphysics, including the *analogia entis*.<sup>12</sup> However, he did not have time to work out the implications of this move and write the prolegomena to his projected *Systematic Theology*. One gets the impression, however, that he is committed to doing this not because he has chosen to adopt a specific metaphysical system as the foundation for his dogmatic system; rather, it seems that he was becoming convinced that doing so is necessary to do justice to the historic, Christian, orthodox, interpretation of the Bible. In the third stage of his career, he was prepared to let the chips fall where they may as far as metaphysics is concerned, and they were beginning to fall in a decidedly Thomistic direction.

Between 2012 and 2016, Webster published three collections of essays: *The Domain of the Word* and the two volumes of *God Without Measure*. He wrote these 35 essays between 2007 and 2015 (the final phase of his career) as "working papers" in preparation for writing a projected five-volume systematic theology he had contracted with Baker. In the remainder of this paper, I want to examine some themes in these essays that illustrate the Thomistic influence on his

<sup>11</sup> Jordan Senner, *John Webster: The Shape and Development of His Thought* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2022), 9.

<sup>12</sup> As early as 2011, Webster could write: "Is the analogy of being the invention of the Antichrist? Hardly: it is a theologoumenon, no less and no more; surely the Antichrist would unleash something a bit more destructive than a somewhat recherche bit of Christian teaching?" in John B. Webster, "Perfection and Participation" in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* Edited by Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

thought. First, I will examine how he employed the well-known Thomistic doctrine of mixed relations between the Creator and creatures to set in place a foundation for the erection of a participatory ontology. He appears to be clarifying his earlier attempts to highlight the ontological differences between God and humanity while emphasizing their relatedness in terms of covenant and moral in nature. One could argue that his thought was moving toward a full embrace of Thomas's doctrine of participation as the means between pantheism (identification of God and creation), on the one hand, and creaturely autonomy (no relation between the Creator and creation), on the other. This move necessarily involves seeing an analogical relation between God and man as the basis for the moral relation. Second, I will point out his use of dual causality to show how the human agent can be free *and* moved by God's grace to embrace Christ. What is interesting about this move is that it is an example of Webster using Thomistic metaphysics in the service of a typically Protestant theme, namely, *sola gratia*. In conclusion, I will offer a few brief reflections on the implications of the movement inspired by Webster for ecumenical dialogue in the future.

#### *Participation and the Thomistic Theory of Mixed Relations*

In his Preface to *The Domain of the Word*, which serves as a preface both to the entire collection of essays in *The Domain of the Word* and *God Without Measure*, Webster says:

Readers of earlier volumes of essays . . . may notice some changes of emphasis and idiom in the present collection: more consideration is paid to patristic and medieval authors and to their heirs in post-Reformation scholastic theology, and more is expected of the theology of creation and of the Spirit. Perhaps most of all, I have found my attention arrested by the preponderance of God's infinitely deep, fully realized life in giving an account of the substance of Christian faith, particularly as it touches upon the relations of God and creatures.<sup>13</sup>

"More is expected of the theology of creation," he says. Is this a very polite way of saying that he is leaving behind the thin Barthian account of creation to embrace the more robust doctrine found in Thomas? To answer this question, we must examine how he develops his account of the God-creature relationship in these essays.

One of the perennial problems in Christian dogmatics is how to express the truth that human beings are utterly dependent on God, yet not in the same genus as God or in any way existing on the same plane of reality as God. Webster articulates the utter transcendence of God in his essay, "Love is Also a Lover of Life: *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness."<sup>14</sup> In this

<sup>13</sup> John Webster "Preface" in, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason*, (London: T & T Clark, 2012), ix–x.

<sup>14</sup> John Webster, "Love is Also a Lover of Life: *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness" in *God Without Measure*, Vol. I, (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 99–114.



essay he says his goal is to address misperceptions about the implications of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* for the goodness of the creature. In particular, he says he wishes to address the “anxiety that the pure non-reciprocal gratuity of God’s creation of all things out of nothing debases the creature, for a being so radically constituted by another as to be nothing apart from that other is a being evacuated of intrinsic worth.”<sup>15</sup> He acknowledges that he is addressing a typically modern worry but points out that this doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* has “proved a permanently contrary article of Christian teaching.”<sup>16</sup>

The essay stresses that God himself is the primary subject of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. It is a statement about the being of God that has implications for the nature of creatures. He writes: “To be the cause of being of all things is proper to God alone.”<sup>17</sup> He also says that God does not simply have the power to create; God is that power “which is his substance and not some accidental property.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, Webster stresses that God is the cause of all things, not by natural necessity but by his will. He wills in accord with his goodness. Furthermore, the act of creation involves no movement or change in God and is incomprehensible to the human creature.

When he turns to what this doctrine of creation implies for the nature of created things, he first stresses that created things are “not eternal, necessary, or undervived.”<sup>19</sup> But, he says, the negatives prepare the way for a positive statement that created things have being in God: “They are not nothing but participate in the good of being.” Quoting Thomas, he writes, “But the being of created things is had by the divine gift, or *per participationem*.”<sup>20</sup> Webster appears to have embraced what could be termed Augustinian Christian Platonism at this point, as we find it in Thomas. Webster elaborates:

The movement by which we understand how creatures participate in being is this: ‘we trace everything that possesses something by sharing, as to its source and cause, to what possesses that thing eternally . . . . But . . . God is his very existing. And so existing belongs to him by his essence, and existing belongs to other things by participation. For the essence of everything else is not its existing, since there can be only one existing that is absolutely and intrinsically existing . . . Therefore, God necessarily causes existing in everything that exists.’<sup>21</sup>

Protestant (or, more accurately, Barthian) worries about maintaining

<sup>15</sup> Webster, “Love is Also a Lover of Life,” 100.

<sup>16</sup> Webster, “Love is Also a Lover of Life,” 100.

<sup>17</sup> Webster, “Love is Also a Lover of Life,” 103.

<sup>18</sup> Webster, “Love is Also a Lover of Life,” 103.

<sup>19</sup> Webster, “Love is Also a Lover of Life,” 106.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia.44,1, ad. 1 as cited by Webster, “Love is Also a Lover of Life,” 106.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, I.68 as cited by Webster, “Love is Also a Lover of Life,” 107.

enough distance between God the Creator and the human creature seem to have evaporated as the metaphysics of participation grounded in a classical theistic conception of God indeed funds a thicker and more robust doctrine of creation.

In another essay in the same volume, “*Non Ex Aequo: God’s Relation to Creatures*,” Webster spells out the Thomistic doctrine of mixed relations that flows from the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* we have watched him expound. The essay begins with a quotation from Thomas’s *De Potentia* in which Thomas says that the relation of the creature to the Creator must be a real relation, but in God, it is only a logical relation. Webster notes the provenance of this teaching in Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, and he notes that it was widely held in medieval theology. In contrast to the medieval period, however, the theory of mixed relations attracts much criticism in the modern period.<sup>22</sup>

One common objection to the theory of mixed relations is that in it “God’s commerce with creatures is accorded no constitutive role.” In response, Webster notes that the point of the doctrine is not to deny God’s relation to creatures “but to invest that relation with a specific character.”<sup>23</sup> What is that specific character? What is denied here is that God is one term in a dyad, that God and creation exist on the same plane. Note that the doctrine of creation here primarily teaches about the nature of God, not simply about the nature of creatures. Webster goes on to flesh out the asymmetrical relationship between God and creation by considering the place of the doctrine of creation in dogmatics.

He points out that modern dogmatics exhibit a “certain disorder or misalignment generated by excessive attention to the divine economy.”<sup>24</sup> Defining Christian divinity as the study of God and all things in relation to God, he says that dogmatics begins by considering God’s being in himself by focusing on his inner works as Father, Son, and Spirit. As dogmatics turns its attention from the processions to the missions, it divides the material into the works of nature (creation and providence) and the works of grace (election, reconciliation, and consummation). The bridge between God *in se* and God *ad extra* is the doctrine of creation, which thus has a double theme: God and all things. So, what is said about God *in se* has to be different from what is said about God *ad extra*. The theory of mixed relations expresses the difference.

It should be noted that Webster quotes Robert Sokolowski’s comment that teaching about creation “opens the logical and theological space for other Christian beliefs and mysteries.”<sup>25</sup> The contemplation of creation allows us to discern “essential properties of the relation between God and created things” that will affect our understanding of other doctrines. Webster is here

<sup>22</sup> John Webster, “*Non Ex Aequo: God’s Relation to Creatures*” in *God Without Measure, Vol. I* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 115–26.

<sup>23</sup> Webster, “*Non Ex Aequo*,” 116.

<sup>24</sup> Webster, “*Non Ex Aequo*,” 116.

<sup>25</sup> Webster, “Love is Also a Lover of Life,” 99.

not only calling for a restoration of the focus on God's being as the object of our contemplation, but he is also laying the foundation for a doctrine of grace that rests on the doctrine of creation. Modern dogmatics suffers from an over-emphasis on the outer works of God, and, as a result, the works of grace can be presented as the final cause of creation rather than the works of nature, which are the inner ground. Although Webster does not quote Barth here, the Barthian doctrine of creation is clearly in the crosshairs. Creation is not merely the platform for the works of grace; it points to the being of God the Creator and his work *in se*. As a mystery, creation reflects the glory of God. The problem, as Webster explains, is that what may be said about the nature of God and creatures and their relation ends up being "determined almost exhaustively by attending to the economy of salvation."<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the anthropocentricity of modern theology is exacerbated by this kind of doctrine of creation.

It should be apparent from what has been said so far that Webster is focussed on the point that the theory of mixed relations is necessary because it allows us to ground theology in the being of God rather than in the God-creature relation without bringing God down to our level and making him one member of a dyad that operates on the same plane of reality. Because God has his being *per se*, Webster concisely says that God creates *ex nihilo*.<sup>27</sup> The danger, he says, is that:

Theology may be so absorbed by Scripture's dramatic-historical presentation of God's relation to creatures that the distinction between God and the world comes to be pictured in comparative or relatively contrastive terms as a distinction within the world, one between commensurable historical agents.<sup>28</sup>

Created being, says Webster, is "entirely gratuitous," which is to say something that might have been different or not at all.<sup>29</sup>

Webster's close reading and faithful reproduction of Thomas's teaching on God and creation, illustrated here by his treatment of the theory of mixed relations, can be read as having specifically Protestant theological implications. It would be rash to ignore Webster's explicit references to the grace of creation as the ground for the grace of God's electing, reconciling, and redemptive work. Whatever evaluation may be given of his use of the doctrine of mixed relations or *creatio ex nihilo*, one thing is clear: the thrust of his thought here is not toward conversion to Rome but toward a deeper, more catholic Protestantism. This aspect of Webster's theology is also seen in the other example I wish to point out: his use of the Thomistic concept of dual causality.

<sup>26</sup> Webster, "Non Ex Aequo," 118–9.

<sup>27</sup> Webster, "Non Ex Aequo," 120.

<sup>28</sup> Webster, "Non Ex Aequo," 122.

<sup>29</sup> Webster, "Non Ex Aequo," 122.

### *The Thomistic Concept of Dual Causality*

For much of his career, Webster followed Barth in utilizing metaphysical concepts in an “*ad hoc*” manner without any large-scale metaphysical commitments. That may work if you want to do what Barth did in CD IV and what Webster was trying to do up to the late 1990s: ground all doctrines in the narrative of Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture. But if you want to make the move Webster made in the mid-2000s and ground all doctrines in God’s eternal being, then you need to engage in metaphysics in a more intentional and systematic manner. One well-trodden path is to become a kind of Thomist. I do not think there is any doubt that he did become a kind of Thomist; the only question left to answer is what kind of Thomist he became. Perhaps a consideration of his treatment of causality can help us with that question.

Webster had already learned from Barth to distinguish between divine omnicausality and divine sole causality. Barth held that omnicausality did not imply sole causality and argued that divine action is the basis of human freedom. However, Webster eventually came to regard Barth’s anthropology as deficient. One problem is that Barth’s definition of human freedom still requires God to withdraw from the creature to provide the creature with the space to be self-initiating. In his final period, Webster adopted a Thomistic account of causality, allowing him to see God as “the cause of creatures who are themselves causes.”<sup>30</sup> Webster explains:

... to attribute all created effects to God as omni-causal is not to rob creatures of their proper action, because what God in his perfect wisdom, power and goodness causes is creatures who are themselves causes. The idea whose spell must be broken is that God is a supremely forceful agent in the same order of being as creatures, acting upon them and so depriving them of movement. . . . God bestows being and activity: this is part of the special sense of creation out of nothing in the Christian confession.<sup>31</sup>

Notice that Barth’s doctrine of the covenant is replaced here by the doctrine of creation out of nothing. God gives being to humans and then gives them redemptive grace that redeems them. Here, we see the Thomistic principle at work: grace perfects nature.

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* also expresses what Robert Sokolowski calls “the Christian distinction.”<sup>32</sup> Senner summarizes this distinction in two principles. First, it means that “two agents can be the cause of a single act if those two agents are not of the same order of being.”<sup>33</sup> God is not part of or

<sup>30</sup> Webster, “Love is Also a Lover of Life,” 112.

<sup>31</sup> Webster, “Love is Also a Lover of Life,” 112.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 32–33. Senner discusses Sokolowski’s influence on Webster in *John Webster: the Shape and Development of His Thought*, 174.

<sup>33</sup> Senner, *John Webster: The Shape and Development of His Thought*, 39.

in a relationship of correspondence to the created order of space and time, but rather utterly transcendent of creation. As such, God is the Creator of the nature of the human creature, which is the cause of human actions. God is not only the first efficient cause of creation but also the formal and final cause of human beings. As formal cause, God gives human beings their powers by giving them a human nature, a nature designed and implanted in them by God.

The second principle that Thomas provides to Webster is the distinction between interior and exterior principles of action. The exterior cause of an action can be God; God causes the human action by causing the interior cause of that action. The concept of freedom operative here differs from modern concepts of freedom, such as self-movement, self-origination, or the will's power to choose, contrary to the agent's own nature. What Thomas means by freedom is the agent's ability to choose without external compulsion. When someone or something else forces me, I am not free, but when my own nature compels me to act, I am free. God does not compel us to do what we do not desire to do; God causes our actions by creating us as creatures with certain inclinations and powers, and we obey ourselves in choosing. God and our own natures simultaneously cause our actions, so we are both caused and free.

My point is that Thomas provides Webster with a set of metaphysical doctrines that permit him to safeguard the reality of grace, which is a prime concern of reformed theology. In the context of a Thomistic concept of dual causality, the human agent can simultaneously be free and enabled by divine grace. *Sola gratia* is thus consistent with freedom and rightly defined. When our fallen natures are healed by infused divine grace (sanctification), we are enabled to freely choose the good for human nature. Thus, we are free in a weaker sense as sinners but in a much stronger sense as redeemed saints. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn 8:36).

## CONCLUSION

In the final decade of his life, John Webster moved from his previous Barthian stance to embrace a kind of Thomism. What do I mean by that? Did he just dabble in certain Thomistic metaphysical concepts in an *ad hoc* manner, or did he embrace Thomistic metaphysics as a system? And if he had not quite reached the point of doing so by the time of his death, would he have embraced Thomistic metaphysics in the process of writing his planned systematic theology? Is Webster's project in *God Without Measure* more like Barth's *ad hoc* use of particular metaphysical concepts, which would not commit him to any specific metaphysical system and which need not involve challenging Kantian metaphysics in an attempt to evade the restrictions of Kantian epistemology, or is it more like a fundamental break with Barth to return to Thomistic metaphysics as a replacement for Kantian metaphysics?

I think it is the latter. However, we need to be careful when using the

word “system” with regard to both Webster and Thomas. There is a powerful logic at work in Thomas’s writings, and he is a thinker who can hold together in his mind simultaneously both extremely abstract principles and extremely detailed applications or conclusions drawn from those principles. So, he operates within a system in the sense that he thinks about truth from both ends at once, so to speak. But this is not the same as saying that he creates a system of deductive truths that flow from axioms with logical rigor and rationalistic completeness. Thomas has no such system and Webster sought no such system.

Thomas expounded Christian doctrine in such a way as to put into words the true meaning of Holy Scripture as interpreted by a believer who seeks the unified wisdom of God as God has revealed it through nature and as God has revealed it through the special revelation given in Scripture. My understanding of what John Webster was up to in the final decade of his life was that he sought to do the same thing as Thomas did, but as a Protestant theologian in the tradition of reformed scholasticism. In this way, he serves as an example for Protestant theologians who find Augustine and Thomas far more helpful in doing theology than Descartes and Kant in the current, decadent phase of late modernity. Perhaps someday, historians will look back on Webster as the inspiration for a school of “Reformed Thomism.”

The Evangelical recovery of Thomistic thought is significant for ecumenical dialogue going forward. This recovery is helping rootless, late modern Evangelicals recover their Protestant roots and thus becoming more catholic. The recovery of Thomas is the recovery of the early Protestant use of Thomas in the formulation of the theology that undergirds the Protestant confessions. How should we evaluate this phenomenon?

There is good news and bad news. First, the good news. For those Roman Catholics who hold firmly to the ecumenical creeds and those Protestants who hold to these creeds, which are presupposed by the seventeenth-century Protestant confessions (Augsburg, Westminster, Thirty-Nine Articles, London), there exists a firm and extensive foundation of agreement as a basis for dialogue. It is already occurring, and I expect it will only gather steam in the years ahead.

But the bad news is that many disagreements that caused disruption in the sixteenth century still exist. These issues are ones of soteriology, sacramentology, and ecclesiology. They relate to such matters as justification by faith alone, the nature of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the Marian dogmas, and the role of the Bishop of Rome.

However, it should be noted that doctrines like how we receive the benefits of Christ’s death in salvation and how the church should be governed are secondary in the sense that they depend on faith in the existence of the Triune God and the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The incarnation involves the preexistence, virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death, bodily resurrection, glorious ascension, heavenly session, and future bodily return of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory. The nature of God and Christ’s

historical achievement of salvation are matters on which we basically agree. It would be going much too far to say that all the rest are details, but it is true that everything else depends on agreement on the doctrines of God and Christ.

With liberal Protestants and liberal Roman Catholics, the foundational doctrines of God and Christ and the permanent truth of the ecumenical creeds of the first five centuries are not matters on which agreement can be presumed. This means that ecumenical dialogue between them proves difficult to get off the ground. It sometimes appears that there is a foundation of agreement, but often, this is only because both sides agree to take the irreversible finality of modernity as the basis for all else. Such dialogue can never result in unity in the faith, even if it attains a *simulacrum of unity* by agreeing in principle to revise the content of the sacred deposit of doctrine in the light of modern naturalism.

Dialogue between conservative, confessional Protestants and theologians of Rome who take seriously the creedal heritage of the faith, on the other hand, may prove to be more complex and is undoubtedly fraught with pitfalls and difficult problems. But it is the only ecumenical dialogue that really matters because it is the only dialogue that can lead to unity in the true faith of the apostles. One of the most significant, long-term results of the renewed interest in the thought of Thomas Aquinas by Evangelicals may turn out to be a new era of ecumenical dialogue, *Deo volente mox*.