

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘God corresponds to Godself’: John Webster’s doctrine of God ‘after’ Karl Barth

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## Abstract

The nature and extent of Karl Barth’s significance in John Webster’s theological formation is widely recognised but remains to be explored in detail. Addressing this lacuna, this essay considers how Barth’s doctrine of the triune God animates Webster’s teaching on the same. In approaching the topic, I show how Webster carries forward Barth’s deep sense of God’s aseity in relation to the world and follows Barth in his commitment to the singularity of God’s triune being. God’s particularity and aseity converge in ‘God’s self-correspondence’ (namely, that God ‘in Godself’ corresponds to God ‘for us’), which represents the core of Barth’s influence on Webster’s theology proper. The final section responds to Katherine Sonderegger’s recent criticism of Webster’s ‘relationalism’, which counts God’s relation to creatures as an integral aspect of God’s eternal life. I reframe the issue in terms of Webster’s late-career retractions of the language of inclusion and divine self-determination, arguing that the difficulties that Sonderegger identifies in earlier writings are overcome in the final decade of Webster’s corpus.

**Keywords:** Thomas Aquinas; Karl Barth; God; Katherine Sonderegger; Trinity; John Webster

The significance of Karl Barth in John Webster’s intellectual formation is widely recognised. The nature and extent of Webster’s reception of Barth, however, remains to be explored. In what follows, I unfold the influence of Barth on Webster’s doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>1</sup> In approaching the topic, I trace three structural principles: aseity, particularity and God’s self-correspondence.<sup>2</sup> First, Webster carries forward Barth’s deep sense

<sup>1</sup>To be sure, Webster’s doctrine of God is not exhausted in what he learned from Barth, but the latter represents an important strand of influence. For a broad survey of Webster’s longstanding engagement with Karl Barth, see Kenneth Oakes, ‘Webster on Karl Barth’, in Michael Allen and David R. Nelson (eds), *A Companion to the Theology of John Webster* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2021), pp. 69–87.

<sup>2</sup>The two principles of aseity and particularity first emerge in Webster’s early study of Eberhard Jüngel. Exploring Jüngel’s work on Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity, *God’s Being is in Becoming*, Webster argues, ‘Jüngel very acutely perceives that the whole thrust of Barth’s theology is to make God’s being *pro se* identical with his being *pro nobis*: God is himself in the event of his free self-bestowal to man in the history of Jesus Christ.’ John Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to his Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986),

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of God's aseity in relation to the world. For present purposes, aseity is a plastic term that includes a cluster of convictions regarding God's self-sufficient and perfect life. Second, Webster follows Barth in his commitment to the singularity and uniqueness of God's triune being. Dogmatics yields to the enactment of God's triune identity. The aseity and particularity of God converge in 'God's self-correspondence', that is, in the notion that God's antecedent existence corresponds with God for us. God's self-correspondence represents the core of Barth's influence on Webster's trinitarian theology proper. In Webster's hands, the principles of particularity and aseity lead to a form of 'holism', in which God's being-in-act is viewed as a coherent whole. In Webster's case, this construal of the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity includes the conviction that theology and economy are 'equiprimordial' aspects of God's singular being. That is, there is no perceptible material ordering. Holism counts God's economic activity as an integral aspect of God's perfect life.

The argument develops in three stages. The first section traces the motifs of particularity and aseity in Webster's early reading of Barth. The second section surveys Webster's deployment of these principles in several representative essays. In the third section, I take up Katherine Sonderegger's recent criticism of Webster's rendering of the relationship between theology and economy. She finds in Webster a form of 'relationalism', which counts God's relation to creatures as an integral part of God's inner life. Responding to this charge, I argue that the difficulties which Sonderegger perceptively identifies in the early and middle periods of Webster's corpus are overcome in the final decade of his writings. Appealing to divine blessedness and goodness, Webster's late-career writings prosecute the principle, 'God corresponds to Godself', in new ways, overcoming the subtle tensions in his earlier writings.<sup>3</sup>

### Webster's reading of Barth

From the mid-1990s, Webster's dogmatic convictions surface in the context of his patient commentary on Barth.<sup>4</sup> Webster's historical work was, in effect, a form of intellectual discipleship.<sup>5</sup> His 1995 monograph, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, sets the agenda for the next two decades. Introducing Barth's often-mischaracterised moral theology, Webster argues for the foundational task of divine aseity. Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, he says, is a 'massively ramified reassertion of the aseity of God'.<sup>6</sup> Divine aseity has a twofold character. On the one hand, the term refers to the unconditionality of God's self-existent triune life. In this negative aspect, aseity denotes God's freedom from external constraints. 'The first principle of all theology', Webster explains, '[is] the majesty and freedom of the prevenient God in which he is utterly distinct, ineffably

p. 17. This leads Webster to explore 'two fundamental theological principles' (ibid., p. 20): first, the particularity of God's being and attributes; second, the aseity or liberality of God, which is actual in the history of Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup>Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), pp. 36, 51; as cited in the 'Translator's Introduction' to the volume, p. xiv (trans. revised).

<sup>4</sup>In 2005 Webster summarised over two decades of his interaction with Karl Barth in this way: 'My chief interest in reading and commenting on Barth has been and remains theology: What moved this person to speak of God in these astonishing ways? What instruction may we take from his astonishment in the matter of our own theological witness?' John Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Scripture, Confession and Church* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), p. viii.

<sup>5</sup>John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp. 13–19.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

prior to all human attempts to make him into one more object of cognisance. God *is*, and is of himself objective to himself.<sup>7</sup> But God's aseity is primarily to be understood as a positive or material concept; God's freedom is undetermined but not indeterminate, 'not fate but form'.<sup>8</sup> God's freedom is actualised or enacted in the history of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> By recasting aseity as God's freedom to love, Barth sets the stage for a proper rendering of God and creature in covenant fellowship. In its twofold character, unconstrained and positive plenitude, divine aseity functions to uphold both God's prevenience and God's intimate presence to creatures.

Alongside the principle of aseity, Webster carries forward Barth's concern for the unsubstitutable, that is, for nameable, irreducible particulars in God. For Barth, this is a distinctively theological judgement which rests on the singularity of God's being. Because God is *this one* who reveals himself *in this way*, theology is required to trace a particular set of movements wherein God enacts his triune life. In this connection, Webster refers to a 'fundamental theological principle' of Barth's doctrine of God: 'In the case of God freedom cannot be defined simply and formally as independence or unconstrainedness; divine freedom is "the freedom proper to and characteristic of Him".'<sup>10</sup> God's particularity issues in a hostility toward abstraction and speculation.<sup>11</sup> Webster remarks:

God's freedom, the aseity of God's loving works, is not to be envisaged as a kind of depth behind those works: seeing it in such terms disrupts the identity of the *essentia dei* and the *opera dei ad extra*, and nearly always leads to a negative definition of divine freedom as independence, absence of constraint, freedom from, rather than freedom for, love. By contrast, Barth defines God's freedom by reference to a basic rule: to ask 'What is God?' is to ask 'Who is God?'<sup>12</sup>

The singularity of God also undertakes an integrating function with regard to God's triune being. Because God corresponds to God's self-manifestation, God's being-in-act (or, what Webster terms, 'life-act') includes God's free bestowal of Godself in and as the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> Webster explains, 'God ... is "*actus purissimus et singularis*".' This singular act is the act in which the triune God seeks fellowship with the creature. What Barth calls God's 'name ... is an utterly gratuitous movement towards created reality'.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, then, God exists only in this singular life-act wherein

<sup>7</sup>John Webster, *Karl Barth*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 78.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>9</sup>'Jesus Christ', Webster argues, is the one 'in whom and as whom God enacts his absolute liberty.' John Webster, 'Locality and Catholicity: Reflections on Theology and the Church', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45/1 (1992), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup>Webster, *Karl Barth*, p. 85; citing Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (hereafter *CD*), 13 vols, ed. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–74), II/1, p. 304.

<sup>11</sup>Webster internalises Barth's worry that reflection on God's life apart from God's relation to creatures will lead to general theism. In 2016 Webster, reflecting on the collection of essays, *Word and Church*, originally published in 2001, recognises there a mistaken 'anxiety that talk of God apart from his transitive works opens the door to generic theism'. John Webster, 'Preface', in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, reprint (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), p. xii.

<sup>12</sup>Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 43; cf. Webster, *Karl Barth*, p. 84. See the later phrase, 'life and activity' in John Webster, 'The Immensity and Ubiquity of God', in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), p. 98.

<sup>14</sup>Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, p. 43; citing Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 264.

God sets himself in relationship with human creatures.<sup>15</sup> Again, for Barth the history of Jesus Christ is the given shape of God's freedom: 'The singularity of God, his sheer factuality, includes God's presence to, and dealings with, his creature.'<sup>16</sup> As Barth says in a celebrated passage: 'We should still not have learned to say "God" correctly ... if we thought it enough simply to say "God".'<sup>17</sup> God's self-determination, then, is not alien but integral to God's singular being. '[God's] innermost being, willing and nature', Barth says, 'does not stand outside all relationships, but stands in a definite relationship *ad extra* to another'.<sup>18</sup> This integrative grammar proves dogmatically basic for Webster's doctrine of God.

### Coordinating theology and economy

The previous section traced the three structural principles of divine aseity, particularity and self-correspondence in Webster's early reading of Barth. It remains, however, to unfold the nature and extent of Webster's reception of these convictions. From the early 2000s, Webster turns his attention to systematics, or the analytic expansion of the gospel. In what follows, I argue that Webster's treatment of the divine attributes reprises the motifs of God's particularity, aseity and self-correspondence he derives from Barth.

In 'The Immensity and Ubiquity of God', Webster devises his teaching on the divine attributes as a counterproposal to a perceived threat in the theological landscape: the collapse of God's self-correspondence.<sup>19</sup> He diagnoses the issue in the following way:

In the matter of ... the divine attributes, it is of capital importance that, under the tutelage of God's self-enactment, theology does not fall into a bifurcation of the *essentia dei* and God's revealed will and activity. That bifurcation can happen (as in 'perfect being theology') by determining the doctrine of God in advance of God's works. But it can also happen from the other end: by giving a wholly 'economic' account of the attributes of God without roots in God's being *in se*.<sup>20</sup>

Two prominent tendencies undermine the fitting correspondence of theology (*essentia dei*) and economy ('God's revealed will and activity'). First, philosophically oriented 'perfect being theology' usurps God's particularity by appropriating 'generally "theistic" metaphysical outlooks'.<sup>21</sup> Sonderegger captures Webster's disquiet:

<sup>15</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, 46: 'God is essentially one whose act is directed towards the reciprocal active life of humanity. ... God's lordship or absoluteness is to its very depths specified by a turning to humanity.'

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup>Barth, *CD II/2*, p. 5. Cf. John Webster, 'Rector et Iudex Super Omnia Genera Doctrinarum? The Place of the Doctrine of Justification', in *God and the Works of God*, vol. 1 of *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), p. 161. 'The statement "God is" is not a closed statement but an open and inclusive one. Because and only because it is a statement about this one, who is who he is and who demonstrates himself to be such in his self-communication, it is also a statement about the ways of God with creatures.'

<sup>18</sup>Barth, *CD II/2*, pp. 5–6; cited in Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, pp. 42–3.

<sup>19</sup>The analysis focuses on two representative essays: Webster, 'The Immensity and Ubiquity of God'; originally printed as John Webster, 'The Immensity and Ubiquity of God', in Ingolf U. Dalferth, Johannes Fischer, and Hans-Peter Grosshans (eds), *Denkwürdiges Geheimnis: Beiträge zur Gotteslehre: Festschrift für Eberhard Jüngel zum 70* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), pp. 539–56; and John Webster, 'God's Perfect Life', in Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker (eds), *God's Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), pp. 143–52.

<sup>20</sup>Webster, 'Immensity and Ubiquity', p. 91.

<sup>21</sup>John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 11; for 'perfect being theology', see e.g. Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz, *The Divine Attributes* (Oxford:

The misalignment of these Divine Predicates follow[s] the trajectory of Enlightenment secularity. The very Perfections of God's Unique Being devolve into notions or forms of intuition about infinite series, real or ideal space, or problematics of the God-world relation, taken in isolation from all Biblical teaching.<sup>22</sup>

Aligning 'with Jüngel and Barth that a swathe of theology in modernity is basically "theistic," Webster offers dissent.<sup>23</sup> 'Christian dogmatics', he says, 'is not concerned with deity but with God.'<sup>24</sup>

The principle of particularity regulates the task of the doctrine of God, which proceeds as positive analytical description. 'God', Webster remarks, 'is not unspecific: he is this one.'<sup>25</sup> The doctrine of the divine attributes, then, traces – by way of conceptual terms transparent to the scriptural testimony – the 'particular perfection' and 'absolute *Istigkeit* of God's being'.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than abandoning metaphysics, Christian dogmatics offers critical correction of ontological claims in light of the gospel.<sup>27</sup> 'If ... good dogmatic order is to prevail, what is required is a thoroughgoing theological correction of concepts like "perfection", "supremacy" or "self-existence"'.<sup>28</sup> The principle of particularity bears on the doctrine of God. Whereas philosophical theism appeals to divinity in generic, Christianly unspecific, terms, theological theology proper binds itself to God's enacted singularity.

Webster also identifies a second problematic trend: an exclusively economic orientation that presses God's relative attributes. This approach appears to avoid the pitfall by overturning idolatrous notions of God's absoluteness and independence, but it ultimately falls claim to the same error: God's self-correspondence is undermined. The corrective lies in the principle of divine aseity, which here surfaces with appeal to 'God's being *in se*'.<sup>29</sup>

The principle of aseity requires asymmetry. 'God's relation to the world' is 'rooted in God's aseity, springing from but in no way completing the limitless sufficiency of God's self-relation as Father, Son and Spirit'.<sup>30</sup> The economy is anchored in God's self-existent life and 'antecedent perfection'.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the way forward, Webster argues, is a fully integrated and properly weighted account of God 'for us' and God 'in Godself': 'The rule of all well-ordered thought about the divine perfections [is] that the integrity and reciprocally determinative character of God's aseity and God's works *ad extra* must not be compromised either by their separation or by the exposition of one at

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Wiley-Blackwell, 2002); Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup>Katherine Sonderegger, 'The God-Intoxicated Theology of a Modern Theologian', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21/1 (2019), p. 38.

<sup>23</sup>Kenneth Oakes, 'Theology, Economy and Christology in John Webster's *God without Measure* and Some Earlier Works', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19/4 (2017), p. 501.

<sup>24</sup>John Webster, 'Holiness and Love of God', in *Confessing God*, p. 110.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>26</sup>Webster, 'Immensity and Ubiquity', pp. 87; cf. pp. 89, 90. See the discussion on theology's 'rhetoric of effacement', in John Webster, *The Culture of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), pp. 77–9.

<sup>27</sup>See John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 33.

<sup>28</sup>Webster, 'Immensity and Ubiquity', p. 90.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 88.

the expense of the other.<sup>32</sup> God's self-correspondence entails both reciprocity and asymmetry – characteristics held, it seems, side-by-side in dialectical tension. Without careful qualification, coordination of theology proper and economy bleeds into integration.

In 'God's Perfect Life', Webster restates the central tasks of coordination and integration. The piece, however, marks a conceptual shift regarding the task of divine perfection, the leading theme of Webster's late-career doctrine of God.<sup>33</sup> Webster writes:

God's perfection is the excellence with which he is what he is; it is *perfectio integralis*, integral perfection in the sense of fullness of identity. This perfection is both *in se* and *ad extra*. ... God's integral perfection does not exclude but rather includes the movement of his perfect being toward creatures in the works of love.<sup>34</sup>

God's perfection bears a 'double character' that reflects the ordered integration of theology and economy.<sup>35</sup> Once again, Webster warns of two opposing dangers. The first – a danger on the decline among contemporary practitioners – is that of collapsing economy into theology. The second, and 'much more pressing' at present, is the 'neglect' of God's immanent life.<sup>36</sup> The way forward, Webster suggests, is coordination: 'a fully integrated and yet properly ordered account of immanent and economic perfection'.<sup>37</sup>

As part of Webster's efforts to coordinate theology and economy, he argues that the object of theology proper, God *in se*, includes economy. 'God's integral perfection does not exclude but rather includes the movement of his perfect being toward creatures in the works of love.'<sup>38</sup> This statement partially reflects the underlying instinct that God's aseity, though in some measure exclusive, does not entail God's absolute separation from creatures. However, how Webster *applies* or prosecutes this instinct will shift in the final decade of his life. For the time, Webster argues that God's innermost life includes God's outward turn. This judgement carries forward the integrative logic of Barth's doctrine of God. Election – God's self-determination to be God-for-us – forms the hinge between theology and economy. 'God's limitless self-determination', Webster says, 'really includes his determination to be present to the creation, and that this determination is not accidental to his holy being but of its essence.'<sup>39</sup> Thinking in the 'wake' of Barth, Webster argues that the theology–economy relationship is characterised by reciprocity, integrity and proper ordering. These considerations lead to a final question regarding God's relationship to creation, namely, its ontological character.

### Theology and economy in the late Webster

In the recent essay, 'The God-Intoxicated Theology of a Modern Theologian', Katherine Sonderegger criticises Webster's 'daring proposal that the Economy was included

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 97. In this statement, 'God's aseity' refers to the immanent aspect of God's self-correspondence.

<sup>33</sup>Fergus Kerr argues that, by 2005, God's perfection is 'the key concept in [Webster's] theology'. Fergus Kerr, 'John Webster and Catholic Theology', *New Blackfriars* 98/1076 (2017), p. 464.

<sup>34</sup>Webster, 'God's Perfect Life', p. 145.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Webster, 'Immensity and Ubiquity', p. 98.

eternally in the Perfect Life of the Immanent God'.<sup>40</sup> She asks whether the influence of Barth may play a determinative role in Webster's construal of the theology–economy relationship – an account which Sonderegger controversially identifies as a form of 'relationalism', in which 'the knowledge and reality of the creature is not added but eternally ingredient in the lofty God who inhabits Eternity'.<sup>41</sup> Relationalism, then, entails the judgement that God's relation to creation is an integral aspect of God's immanent life or aseity. She explains,

We may wonder here whether the strong legacy of Barth in Webster's theological formation might lead him to affirm – too readily, I say – an anticipatory or internal relation God is said to have to creation, or to creaturely conditions, such a[s] time or history or finitude. I believe that Webster might, in turn, simply refuse the dilemma: either a strong distinction between *ad intra* and *ad extra*; or an anticipation of them within the Godhead. 'Inclusion', however, or its synonyms, cannot properly mark off the Mystery of God's own Self-presence to the world as it suggests that the world and its kind are in some way enfolded, already and always, into the Eternal Reality of God.<sup>42</sup>

What are we to make of this judgement? Initially, we find much to commend. It identifies Webster as a modern theologian, that is, one whose project reflects the occasion (its problematics and proposed solution) of post-Enlightenment theology. It also captures the holism or correlationalist impulse of the early and middle periods of Webster's writings, which take their inspiration from Barth. As demonstrated above, Barth's doctrine of God provides a means of confronting some of the most basic disorders of modern theology. But the criticism understates the extent of the revisions in the final decade of Webster's corpus.

In what follows, I will argue that Sonderegger's charge of relationalism does not represent Webster's mature doctrine of God the Trinity. By reframing the discussion in terms of the formative influence of Thomas Aquinas, as well as Webster's late retraction of the language of inclusion and God's self-determination, I argue that from 2010 onwards Webster refines his earlier construal of the God–creature relationship.

### *Thomas Aquinas and the 'Christian distinction'*

Webster's early intellectual formation under two leading figures of the German Protestant tradition, namely, Eberhard Jüngel and Karl Barth, deeply shapes his doctrine of the Trinity. From the mid-2000s, however, Webster increasingly appeals to patristic and medieval theologians, most notably, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. In the final decade of his writings, Webster retrieves a classically informed account of God's perfection, goodness and simplicity. Drawing on the work of Robert Sokolowski and David Burrell, among others, Webster sets forth 'the Christian distinction', that is, the difference between God and creatures which is beyond both reciprocity and dialectic. Webster finds in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and their interpreters, conceptual resources to establish the liberality of God's creative and redemptive acts. It is precisely the prevenient, self-existent life of God that secures the graciousness of

<sup>40</sup>Sonderegger, 'God-Intoxicated Theology', p. 25.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 42–3.



God's relation to creation. In this way, he overcomes some of the tension or ambiguity in his earlier construal of God's perfection. Two aspects of Webster's late teaching on God bring the shift regarding 'relationalism' into relief: 1) the simplicity and perfection of God's blessedness in Godself; and 2) divine goodness as the hinge between theology proper and economy. Both features emerge in the context of Webster's construal of the doctrine of creation. I will consider each theme in turn.

First, Webster argues that the doctrine of creation forms a part of the 'deep logic of the Christian confession' by drawing attention to God's blessedness.<sup>43</sup> Citing Thomas Aquinas, Webster argues that God 'himself is his own beatitude' for 'he is not made happy by making things, but through being all-sufficient to himself and need not the things he made'.<sup>44</sup> To bring God's blessedness to expression, Webster appeals to several other key distinctions. He draws an absolute distinction between uncreated and created being. He distinguishes between God's immanent activity and God's transitive acts. Finally, he suggests that the God-creature relation is 'mixed': real or ontologically constitutive on the side of creatures and not real or logical on the side of God.<sup>45</sup>

In each case, Webster confesses what Robert Sokolowski calls the 'Christian distinction', the conviction of God's perfection and simplicity apart from and prior to God's creation of the world. Because the act of creation is 'the introduction of being entirely', there is a gulf between the uncreated God and created being.<sup>46</sup> Creation is that which might not have been; God is that which would have been, even if the world were not. Sokolowski remarks:

It is meaningful to say that the one pure act of *esse subsistens* could 'be' all alone. ... The contrast to *esse subsistens* is not differentiation, but nothing other at all. That there is, in fact, anything other than the one pure act of *esse subsistens* is due not to the necessity of being coupled or paired ... but to the unnecessitated choice exercised by the creator.<sup>47</sup>

In Webster's hands, the doctrine of creation entails the 'nonexistence of all things apart from the will, love, and goodness of God but also with the fact that in his simplicity and entire sufficiency, God would be wholly himself were there no world'.<sup>48</sup> This counterfactual profession, made in the wake of the apostles and prophets, is meaningful in that it affirms God's utter self-sufficiency.

Second, Webster's earlier teaching followed Barth's conviction that God's outward turn toward creatures rests on God's self-determination to be God-for-us. Without relinquishing the sense that God's creative and redemptive acts follow from 'something like a decision', Webster increasingly grounds God's economic acts in divine

<sup>43</sup>John Webster, 'Creation out of Nothing', in Michael Allen and Scott Swain (eds), *Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), p. 130.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 140; citing Thomas Aquinas, 'Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei', in *On Creation*, trans. S. C. Selner (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 4.2, ad 5.

<sup>45</sup>Webster, 'Creation out of Nothing', p. 147.

<sup>46</sup>Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.45.1; cited in Webster, 'Trinity and Creation', in *God and the Works of God*, p. 92; Webster, "'Love is Also a Lover of Life": "Creatio Ex Nihilo" and Creaturely Goodness', in *God and the Works of God*, p. 104.

<sup>47</sup>Robert Sokolowski, *Presence and Absence: A Philosophical Investigation of Language and Being* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 179; cited in Webster, 'Creation out of Nothing', p. 147; and Webster, 'Trinity and Creation', p. 91.

<sup>48</sup>Webster, 'Creation out of Nothing', p. 131.



goodness.<sup>49</sup> Divine goodness is the hinge whereby dogmatics moves from God considered absolutely (that is, apart from God's relation to creatures) to God considered relatively (that is, in God's works of nature and grace).

Divine blessedness and goodness lead Webster to refashion earlier statements which seem to indicate that God's immanent life somehow includes God's transitive acts. This is particularly relevant in light of Sonderegger's criticism. Webster maintains a 'well-formed doctrine of God's immanent triune plenitude and bliss, to which creation adds nothing and from which it takes nothing away'.<sup>50</sup> This confession, Webster suggests, has been under significant strain in many strands of contemporary theology. In response to this theological landscape, Thomas provides a conceptual and principial repository for securing something fundamental to the Christian doctrine of God. Thomas does so, moreover, without being hampered by some of the more recent debates of modern theology, which in Webster's mind, stall the rightly ordered task of Christian dogmatics.

### Redacting 'relationalism'

In 2015, Webster published a two-volume compilation of essays (for the most part, previously published) titled, *God without Measure*.<sup>51</sup> The following section draws attention to two predominant threads of silent editorial revisions which occur in the reprinted form of several essays. First, we find a refashioning of the relationship and distinction between theology proper and economy by redacting the language of 'inclusion'. Second, teaching on election is revised by redacting the self-referential character (observable in the language of *self-determination*) of God's eternal decision or decree. Additionally, Webster refashions the decision-character of election with an appeal to God's communicative goodness. Though subtle, these editorial judgements suggest a sharper distinction between theology proper and economy, and just so serve to illumine the trajectory of his most mature theology. Theology and economy are no longer equiprimordial but strictly and asymmetrically ordered.

We begin with the question of how God's antecedent life relates to God's relation with creatures. In particular, we ask whether God's antecedent existence includes the 'knowledge and reality of the creature'. As demonstrated above, Webster's early dogmatic writings, at the very least, border on a form of relationalism. In 2015 Webster reprints the 2007 essay 'God's Aseity', as 'Life in and of Himself, in the first volume of *God without Measure*. The reprinted form includes several silent revisions of the language of inclusion. Let us consider two representative examples by comparing the following passages:

[2007] Who is the God, the enactment of whose utter sufficiency as Father, Son and Holy Spirit *includes* his creative, reconciling and perfecting works towards his creatures?<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>50</sup>John Webster, 'Omnia ... Pertractantur in Sacra Doctrina Sub Ratione Dei: On the Matter of Christian Theology', in *God and the Works of God*, p. 9.

<sup>51</sup>On these two volumes, see especially the 'Book Symposium', in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19/4 (2017), with contributions by Martin Westerholm, Matthew Levering, Kenneth Oakes and Kevin Vanhoozer.

<sup>52</sup>John Webster, 'God's Aseity', in Michael Scott and Andrew Moore (eds), *Realism and Religion: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 147 (emphasis added).

[2015] Who is the God, the enactment of whose utter sufficiency as Father, Son and Holy Spirit *issues in* his creative, reconciling and perfecting works towards his creatures?<sup>53</sup>

[2007] The perfection of God's life as *autotheos* includes his works as Father, Son and Spirit in creation, reconciliation and redemption.<sup>54</sup>

[2015] The perfection of God's life as *autotheos* issues in his works as Father, Son and Spirit in creation, reconciliation and redemption.<sup>55</sup>

In the statements from 2007, we find the representative, albeit unclear, judgement that God's perfection or divine aseity 'includes' God's works *ad extra*. In the final form of this essay, however, the language of 'inclusion' is redacted. In its place, we find, 'issues in'.

Parallel redactions occur across Webster's late-career writings. Take an example from another context: in 2011 Webster published the essay, 'In the Society of God', which reuses material from his 2007 Kantzer lectures:

[2007] Theology proper attends to this one – the one whose perfect life *includes* the movement of bestowing and maintaining the life of creatures.<sup>56</sup>

[2011] The one to whom dogmatics attends in theology proper is this one – the one who is *moved by perfect goodness* to bestow and maintain creaturely fellowship.<sup>57</sup>

In this case, God's 'perfect goodness' – a key late-career pairing – replaces the earlier language of inclusion. This editorial judgement signals the task which Webster assigns to divine goodness.

Divine goodness constitutes the hinge of theology and economy without falling prey to abstraction (goodness is the given shape of the divine intention or purpose) and without detriment to the freedom of God's willing of another. In addition, in view of more radical readings of Barth's doctrine of election, divine goodness prosecutes that basic instinct of the correspondence of God's inner activity and outer works without insinuating constitutive force to God's turn to creatures.

The language of 'inclusion' arguably sits in tension with the material instinct of God's perfection. Nonetheless, it is prevalent in earlier writings. Sonderegger's criticism of Webster's relationalism relies, in part, on Webster's use of this language. She argues, "Inclusion" ... or its synonyms, cannot properly mark off the Mystery of God's own Self-presence to the world as it suggests that the world and its kind are in some way enfolded ... into the Eternal Reality of God.<sup>58</sup> Webster's editorial judgements convey

<sup>53</sup>John Webster, 'Life in and of Himself, in *God and the Works of God*, p. 13 (emphasis added).

<sup>54</sup>Webster, 'God's Aseity', pp. 153–4.

<sup>55</sup>Webster, 'Life in and of Himself', p. 19.

<sup>56</sup>John Webster, 'He Will Be With Them', in *Perfection and Presence: God with Us, According to the Christian Confession* (Kantzer Lectures in Revealed Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, 2007).

<sup>57</sup>John Webster, "In the Society of God": Some Principles of Ecclesiology', in Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), p. 206. The first occurrence of the language 'issues in' occurs later in the same essay: 'The Son's deity issues in an outward movement, that is, in the temporal mission of reconciliation' (*ibid.*, p. 210).

<sup>58</sup>Sonderegger, 'God-Intoxicated Theology', pp. 42–3. Cf. p. 40: 'To say that God in His Inner Life includes the movement *ad extra* sounds perilously close to an objective expression of an "internal relation" between the Maker and the made.'

a sharper distinction between God in Godself and God-for-us. Furthermore, the redactions and appendages set Sonderegger's charge of 'relationalism' in question, insofar as this is applied to his later writings.<sup>59</sup>

With regard to the doctrine of election, we find two forms of revision. First, the term 'self-determination' is, in some cases, redacted to 'determination', and in others, removed entirely.<sup>60</sup> Second, the emphasis in God's electing decision is placed on divine goodness as that which moves God outside Godself. We find the occasion for this late shift in Webster's early appreciation of Barth's doctrine of election. Following in Barth's wake, Webster argues that 'Most properly, election concerns the sovereign directedness of the being of God to us, the divine self-determination to summon, protect and bless a people for himself.'<sup>61</sup> Implicit in Barth's understanding is a self-referential aspect of God's good purpose. 'In His own freedom', Barth says, '... God above all willed and determined Himself to be the Father and the Son in the unity of the Spirit.'<sup>62</sup> While this judgement has been radicalised in some interpretations of Barth, Webster's retrieval is more chastened. In particular, he is hesitant to deploy language that ascribes constitutive force to God's electing decree.

Without denying the intentionality of God's economic acts, Webster's late-career writings refashion the character of God's eternal decree, both by redacting the self-referential aspect and by pressing the coherence of God's will and (simple, perfect, and good) nature. For a striking illustration of these shifts, we may look to some key redactions in the reprinted form of the 2009 essay, '*Rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum?*' In 2009, Webster argues, 'The love of God, made known in his works *ad extra*, is entirely a matter of God's free self-determination. ... Of his own will, God designs that his life should execute this further movement.'<sup>63</sup> In 2015 we find two revisions. First, 'God's free self-determination', is redacted to 'God's free determination', thereby rendering the decision-character of divine election transitive, outward facing. Second, Webster further classifies God's economic acts as corresponding to God's nature. 'Of his own will *and in accordance with his nature*', Webster argues, 'God designs that his life should execute this further movement.'<sup>64</sup> The appendage, '*and in*

<sup>59</sup>Richard Brash reaches a similar conclusion regarding Sonderegger's critique. He says, 'Webster did indeed make the necessary adjustments in his later work, and he no longer retained the language of "inclusion" in his account of the economy's relation to the essence of God.' Richard Fraser Brash, 'John Webster: A Reformed Theologian on Revelation', *Calvin Theological Journal* 55/1 (2020), p. 20.

<sup>60</sup>Given the predominance of the language of 'self-determination' in earlier writings – an expression that takes part of its inspiration from Karl Barth – it is striking that Webster never uses this locution in reference to God in the two volumes of *God without Measure*. The latest use occurs in John Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', in Andrew T. Lincoln and Angus Paddison (eds), *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 138–55; cf. p. 141: 'The resurrection of Jesus is thus part of the material definition of God's aseity: in and of himself, in free self-determination, God is and acts *thus*.'

<sup>61</sup>John Webster, 'On Evangelical Ecclesiology', in *Confessing God*, p. 168.

<sup>62</sup>Karl Barth, 'The Gift of "Freedom"', in *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), p. 71; cited in Webster, 'Freedom in Limitation', p. 107. See further Webster, *Karl Barth*, p. 86; Webster, 'Translator's Introduction', p. xvii.

<sup>63</sup>We find a similar instance in 'God's Aseity' in the context of discussing the character of the world's necessity for God, which Webster classifies as a necessity of consequence. This entails that the necessity is grounded or rooted in 'God's will or self-determination, and has no further reference to realities beyond that will.' Webster, 'God's Aseity', p. 157. In the reprinted version, Webster redacts the term, 'self-determination'. Webster, 'Life in and of Himself', p. 23.

<sup>64</sup>Webster, '*Rector et Iudex*', p. 160 (emphasis added).

*accordance with his nature*', signals Webster's concern to bind God's decree and God's perfect goodness.

These occurrences raise the question: what does Webster find problematic with this language of 'self-determination'?<sup>65</sup> Without careful qualification, the attributive, 'self', may suggest that God's decision is ontologically constitutive of God's nature.<sup>66</sup> By implying that God's willing of creatures and God's willing of Godself are, in some sense, analogous, it begs the question of whether both willings are necessary.<sup>67</sup> On Webster's terms, such necessity with respect to God's nature would undermine the graciousness of God's outer activity. Take, for instance, another paradigmatic redaction which, at the very least, demonstrates Webster's awareness of these difficulties. In 2009 Webster stipulates that 'God wills both his own life and the life of creatures.'<sup>68</sup> The reprinted passage reads differently: 'God has life in himself and wills the life of creatures.'<sup>69</sup> The instinct to distinguish God and creatures resurfaces.

Webster's redactions to his essay, 'Human Dignity', first published in 2007, provide further indications of his late-career position on these matters. In discussing the character of creaturely dignity or value, the essay follows a programmatic path which grounds human dignity in God. Despite this basic longstanding instinct, namely that theology is theological, we find a refashioning of the nature of God's antecedent life. Compare the following passages:

[2007] Human judgements about dignity can only be repetitions of the divine judgement, acts in which honour is recognized as an indicative and imperative which rests on *the divine decision*. ... Yet it is precisely at this point that the basis of human dignity in the *divine decision* has to be brought to the fore.<sup>70</sup>

[2015] Human judgements about dignity can only be repetitions of the divine judgement, acts in which honour is recognized as an indicative and imperative which rests on the authority of *creative divine goodness*. ... Yet it is precisely at this point that the basis of human dignity in the *creator's beneficence* has to be brought to the fore.<sup>71</sup>

Whereas in 2007, Webster argues that God's verdict regarding human dignity 'rests on the divine decision' and finds its 'basis ... in the divine decision', he later refines this idiom of decision by grounding God's judgement in 'the authority of creative divine

<sup>65</sup>In earlier writings, the language of self-determination often served to underscore the liberality and particularity of God's being. Cf. John Webster, 'The Holiness and Love of God', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57/3 (August 2004), p. 114. 'God is not indeterminate deity, but the self-determining one.' See also John Webster, 'Hope', in *Confessing God*, p. 198.

<sup>66</sup>Given Webster's public silence on the matter, it remains an open question the extent to which the 'Barth wars' influenced Webster's suspicion of language that could signal ontological constitution.

<sup>67</sup>In certain instances, Barth's language tends in this direction: 'He wills Himself together with us. He wills Himself in fellowship with us.' Barth, *CD IV/2*, p. 777.

<sup>68</sup>John Webster, 'Rector et Iudex Super Omnia Genera Doctrinarum?: The Place of the Doctrine of Justification', in Michael Weinrich and John P. Burgess (eds), *What is Justification About?: Reformed Contributions to an Ecumenical Theme* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), p. 36.

<sup>69</sup>Webster, 'Rector et Iudex', in *God and the Works of God*, p. 160.

<sup>70</sup>John Webster, 'The Dignity of Creatures', in *The Love of God and Human Dignity: Essays in Honour of George M. Newlands* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 24 (emphasis added).

<sup>71</sup>John Webster, 'The Dignity of Creatures', in *Virtue and Intellect*, vol. 2 of *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), p. 37 (emphasis added).

goodness' and 'the creator's beneficence'. In like manner, whereas in 2007 Webster argues that creaturely value is 'grounded in the purpose, will and work of God',<sup>72</sup> the reprinted essay further qualifies such a backward reference as 'the purpose and operations of God's goodness'.<sup>73</sup> The basic orientation remains the same. Webster traces God's outer works to God's immanent life.

In a conceptual advance, Webster appeals to divine goodness to coordinate God's will to God's nature and, just so, eschew the risk of abstraction. Divine goodness undertakes the function of divine election. Further appeal to divine goodness, then, provides a means of expanding the intent of Webster's 'holism', without 'threaten[ing] divine aseity'.<sup>74</sup>

Webster expands the motif of divine goodness in the essay, "Love is Also a Lover of Life": "*Creatio Ex Nihilo*" and Creaturely Goodness'. He writes:

In creating, God acts in accordance with his goodness. ... Divine goodness is creative of likenesses of itself; divine being bestows being. Here metaphysical goodness shades into moral goodness, in that God's work of creation manifests that, precisely because his perfect goodness cannot be expended, he does not begrudge other things their being, but, on the contrary, gives being to other things. 'God is good – or rather the source of goodness – and the good has no envy for anything. Thus, because he envies nothing its existence, he made everything from nothing through his own Word, our Lord Jesus Christ.'<sup>75</sup>

God's 'benevolent love' is creative.<sup>76</sup> Divine goodness indicates both the non-necessity of the act and the fitting correspondence between God's immanent life and outer creative work.

An account of Webster's doctrine of the triune God must take these revisions into consideration. Earlier statements that include God's relation to creatures within God's perfect life, were, at the least, unguarded and misleading. They reflected Webster's long-standing concern not to bifurcate God *in se* and God for us. In his late career, Webster found more meaningful ways to prosecute these instincts without undermining a sense of God's (evangelically determined) independence, which forms the ground of God's relation to creatures. 'The act of creation', Webster argues, 'does not bring about a state of affairs in which God's fullness now includes his relation to creatures.'<sup>77</sup>

## Conclusion

Webster's theological formation represents a gradual movement whereby he amplifies principles learned early on. Following after Barth, Webster affirms that God's inner

<sup>72</sup>Webster, 'The Dignity of Creatures', in *The Love of God and Human Dignity*, p. 19.

<sup>73</sup>Webster, 'The Dignity of Creatures,' in *Virtue and Intellect*, p. 30.

<sup>74</sup>John Webster, 'Incarnation', in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (New York: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 137.

<sup>75</sup>Webster, "Love is Also a Lover of Life", p. 104; citing Athanasius, *De incarnatione*, in *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, ed. and trans. R. W. Thomson (Oxford: OUP, 1971), §3.

<sup>76</sup>Webster, "Love is Also a Lover of Life", p. 111.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 138. cf. Webster, 'Trinity and Creation', p. 91: 'The creator can be conceived neither by thinking of him as in some fashion continuous with the world, nor by conceiving of a purely dialectical relation between uncreated and created being; both continuity and discontinuity turn the divine difference from creation into a relative or comparative property and so make creation intrinsic to God's fullness.'

life corresponds to God's outer activity without undermining God's aseity and perfection. Within the context of these material principles, there is a trajectory toward the antecedent conditions (namely, the 'immanent Trinity') of God's redemptive actions. This focus on God's perfection stands in tension with a lingering holism or 'relationalism', which counts God's turn to creatures as an integral aspect of God's immanent life. In Webster's late career, he appeals to other interlocutors, most notably, Thomas Aquinas and his interpreters, in order to apply the logic of divine perfection with increasing consistency. This trajectory culminates with the 'Christian distinction', that is, the confession of God's absolute perfection apart from and prior to God's creation of the world. To be sure, what we find in Webster's final writings is fragmentary and *in via*; the tectonic plates had not yet stopped shifting. Nevertheless, Webster provides sufficient clues in his latest writings to indicate that 'holism' and its corollary, 'relationalism', were no longer operative principles in his thought.