


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The architecture of transcendence: John Webster and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on divine agency, christology and theological method

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## Abstract

John Webster and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are two theologians invested in prioritising certain conceptions of divine transcendence within their respective theological projects. Specifically, both appeal to conceptions of divine transcendence and agency amidst what they understand to be the problematic naturalisation of theological discourse in modern Protestant theology, particularly within its liberal German traditions. The way they understand transcendence, however, and the doctrinal *loci* they choose to affect it, leads to different conceptualisations of the possibilities, scope and organisation of systematic theology. Where Webster (especially in his later work) seeks to prioritise God's immanent perfection and aseity through theology proper, Bonhoeffer instead emphasises God's freedom *pro me* within the person of Jesus Christ. These differences in first theological foundations have important consequences for the shape of theological method and doctrinal architecture within the practice of contemporary systematic theology.

**Keywords:** Dietrich Bonhoeffer; christology; divine transcendence; theological method; John Webster

Theology claims to study an Object (and Subject) who profoundly exceeds its contemplation.<sup>1</sup> How, then, does theology account for the tension between the transcendence of God and the particularities of its own human history and discourse? Furthermore, how does this tension shape and arrange theological knowing itself? In his inaugural lecture at Oxford, 'Theological Theology', John Webster argues that the 'distinctiveness of Christian theology' lies within 'its invocation of God as agent in the intellectual practice of theology'.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the progression of his career, Webster expands on this definition by seeking to ground all theological talk in a trinitarian account of God's

<sup>1</sup>For God as both Object and Subject to theology, see: Katherine Sonderegger, *The Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), pp. xii–xiii.

<sup>2</sup>John Webster, *Theological Theology: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford on 28 October, 1997* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), repr. in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), p. 25.

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immanent perfection and aseity, a foundation he believes modern theology frequently annexes to Christology.<sup>3</sup> Theological theology falters, therefore, especially in Webster's late theology, when detached from a robust foundational understanding of God's eternal magnitude, liveliness and transcendence *a se* as theology's first words. It is attention to divine transcendence, agency and aseity, not to human means or methods of knowledge acquisition, that makes theology both possible and critical; hence, the need for a more 'theological' practice of theology.

Within his developing account of theological theology, Webster mounts a significant critique of modern applications of theological reason as they have developed under the conditions of Enlightenment thought, particularly within the programmatic intellectual system of Immanuel Kant and the liberal Protestant traditions of nineteenth-century Germany. Protestant theology in this period of modernity, Webster argues, has given itself over to a conception of 'history as first reality' in which theology's first domain – that of God *in se* and *a se* – is considered secondary to the merely observable, created, historical conditions of the divine *oikos*.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, much modern Protestant theology, especially within the locus of Christology (and its inflated cousins, revelation and ecclesiology), grounds and arranges systematic theology from economy (*oikonomia*) as opposed to theology proper (*theologia*). The result is not only a disordered systematic theology, but a profound naturalisation of theological knowledge and its various subdisciplines that arises from a radically underdetermined account of God's transcendence and agency *a se*.

In ways that anticipate Webster's critique of theology in modernity, the early academic theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer similarly seeks to respond to liberal Protestantism post-Kant by highlighting divine transcendence as the ground and grammar of theological knowing. Yet if Bonhoeffer shares a diagnosis of Protestant theology in modernity with Webster, his prescription differs in important ways: where Webster prioritises God's aseity independent of creatures and created things, Bonhoeffer speaks of theology's origins within the encounter of God's being *pro me* in the person of Jesus Christ. For Bonhoeffer, theological talk indeed originates and is determined by divine transcendence and agency, but it is a form of transcendence expressed most fully within the lordly presence of the risen Christ. This leads Bonhoeffer to prioritise divine promeity as the revelation of the 'ultimate reality'. As a result, Bonhoeffer, unlike his liberal teachers in Berlin, argues that theology 'cannot point to anything other than the transcendence of its object'.<sup>5</sup> God's relative promeity in the personal presence of Jesus Christ encounters human creatures in a way that indicates the sufficiency of theology's

<sup>3</sup>The shape and development of Webster's (incomplete) theological project is of pressing debate within recent reception of his work, especially as it relates to his so-called 'turn' from the theological legacy of Karl Barth to an increasing reliance on Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic and premodern resources. Jordan Senner, for example, characterises Webster's development within three, interrelated phases: christocentric, trinitarian and finally theocentric, in which a fully fledged account of the immanent Trinity and divine perfection takes priority. In this article, I will comment only on developmental matters germane to my overall argument. See Jordan Senner, *John Webster: The Shape and Development of his Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2022).

<sup>4</sup>John Webster, 'Christology, Theology, Economy: The Place of Christology in Systematic Theology', in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* [hereafter *GWM*], 2 vols (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), vol. 1, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology', in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, vol. 12 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* [hereafter *DBWE* 12], ed. Larry Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 301.

second domain – the created, historical conditions of the world and its inhabitants – precisely because that is where human beings find themselves being encountered by Christ. Theology may reach beyond this encounter, but in doing so risks circumnavigating God's concrete claim over us. Instead, for Bonhoeffer, God's relative promisey determines a form of silence before the Word of God who determines faithful theological speech.

While sharing a firm commitment to prioritising divine transcendence within theological method, these two theologians' respective developments of transcendence through the concepts of aseity or promisey have very different consequences for the way in which they understand the scope, order and proportion of theological architecture.<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, unlike Webster, is willing to risk tying Christ's presence to creaturely knowledge of God in a way that helps him better make sense of the historical and cultural enclosures of theological discourse itself. Webster, on the other hand, risks idealising the empirical features of such discourse in ways that he believes grounds theological talk in its proper metaphysical context. The resultant tensions between prioritising divine aseity or promisey regarding the shape of theological architecture may therefore be parsed out between Webster and Bonhoeffer's respective approaches to first theology. Promisey qua Bonhoeffer, divorced from aseity, as Webster demonstrates, risks identifying the empirical aspects of theological discourse in a way that too closely identifies God's eternal being with God's economic acts. Alternatively, aseity qua Webster, divorced from promisey, produces an overly static idealisation of history that lacks robust attention to the cultural and historical conditioning of all creaturely knowledge of God.

Through examining these tensions, this essay seeks to explore the ways in which the articulation of divine transcendence and agency shapes theological method, architecture and arrangement. I argue for a more critical approach regarding the ways in which Webster's theological method can be used to universalise a particular set of enculturated theological practices and subjectivity that in turn compete with and marginalise other forms of theological knowing and arrangement. In short, the naturalisation of theological reason in modernity cannot simply be met with the corresponding idealisation of theological knowing that ignores important modern insights into the social and historical conditioning of all human intellectual activities. It is not that Webster's theological method has no conception of human history; rather, the grounding of that history within God *in se* and *a se* can lead to a certain kind of blindness to the ways in which all human theological discourse is necessarily enculturated, particularly regarding systematic theology's relationship to other forms of theological knowing. An alternative position to these universalising dangers within first theology, I contend, can be maintained without, as Webster worries, reducing systematic theology's distinctive claim to God as the primary agent of all theological speech. Bonhoeffer, then, in his articulation of God's promisey in the person of Jesus Christ, represents one (corrigible) approach in which the tension between divine transcendence and human discourse can be maintained.

### **Divine aseity as the ground and grammar of John Webster's 'theological theology'**

Theological theology is an approach that seeks to prioritise the eternal liveliness and non-contingent agency of God as the ground and grammar of theological knowing.

<sup>6</sup>The language of 'theological architecture' – here referring to the scope, ordering and proportioning of various doctrinal *loci* within the task of systematic theology – is drawn from: A. N. Williams, *The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, and Ratio* (Oxford: OUP, 2011).

Webster argues that theology is theological when its foundational confession is God, specifically of God's eternal, perfect being as the immanent Trinity. Theology's first word, very simply, is God, immanently and eternally considered *a se*. The correct apprehension of created things – for example, human agency, the nature of history, the church's social location and so on – can therefore only be acquired from a balanced exposition of God's immanent perfection and aseity. This is because systematic theology aspires to the orderly exposition of 'God and all things studied under the formality of being relative to God'.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, to determine God's external operations as derivative of God's inner life is not to neglect the actions of God in the world, rather, it seeks to properly ground these acts as acts of pure spontaneity and grace. The material, derivative and subordinate relation between theology proper and economy therefore ensures the nature of human knowing and subjectivity is grounded in the more fundamental reality of God's inner life. This two-tiered order 'is irreversible, because created things are comprehensible only as effects of God's external operations, and those operations are in turn comprehensible only as they are seen to flow from God's perfect beatitude and simplicity'.<sup>8</sup> Creaturely knowledge of God is derivative of God's own eternal self-knowledge which God shares with creation. Theology is theological insofar as God's works *ad extra* are properly grounded within prior understanding of God *a se* and *in se*.

All this means that theology is possible. There is not only *theologia in se*, the archetypal knowledge of God himself; there is also *theologia nostra*, ectypal theology. The possibility of human intellectual acts which are genuinely theological is discerned not first of all by enumerating human capabilities but by attending to the fullness of God's own life and knowledge and by tracing the outer works of God's love.<sup>9</sup>

Divine aseity is therefore both the ground and grammar of a theological, systematic theology, describing both the form of God's transcendence as the primary agent of creaturely knowing and giving such knowing its necessary order, proportion and shape.

Such a locating of the theological task within God *in se*, Webster argues, runs counter to much modern theological practice within the last 250 years. In particular, modern theology's appropriation of Kantian reason and intellectual practice has 'de-regionalized' theology from its proper context, not only from within ecclesiastical traditions and communities, but, as Webster emphasises in his later work in particular, more fundamentally from theology's place within the divine economy.<sup>10</sup> This, in turn, has resulted in a warped understanding of history in which the merely empirical or phenomenological aspects of human life are elevated as first reality. This means that modern theology, especially in relation to surrounding non-theological disciplines and knowledges within the modern academy, not only 'encourages us to envisage the church, Scripture, and holiness as only historical magnitudes', but also to 'envisage theological inquiry as an instance of

<sup>7</sup>John Webster, 'Omnia ... Pertractantur in Sacra Doctrina Sub Ratione Dei: On the Matter of Christian Theology', in *GWM*, vol. 1, p. 4. The (Thomistic) phrase 'God and all things under God' appears in various forms throughout Webster's wider corpus, being a succinct summary of Webster's understanding of the scope and ordering of systematic theology. See e.g. John Webster, 'Principles of Systematic Theology', in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), p. 133; John Webster, 'What Makes Theology Theological?' in *GWM*, vol. 1, p. 213.

<sup>8</sup>Webster, 'What Makes Theology Theological?', p. 215.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>10</sup>Webster, 'Theological Theology', p. 22.

religious sociology or literary and historical studies'.<sup>11</sup> The 'object of theology', however, 'belongs to a different ontological order ... Theology is a science of history only insofar as it views history under the double determination of creation and redemption.'<sup>12</sup>

In this process of theological naturalisation, it is not simply that Christian divinity has been displaced by Enlightenment rationality, but also that theology itself greatly contributed to its own decline. Christian theology in modernity, especially within the locus of Christology, has reversed the theology–economy relation by a disproportionate investigation into the economic history of Jesus divorced from God's immanent life *a se*. Specifically, with their attention to the historical features of the incarnation, modern Christologies risk deriving features of God's eternal life from God's external acts. The shape of Christology in modernity, particularly as it relates to the liberal German Protestant traditions which shaped Bonhoeffer's own theological formation, therefore represents for Webster a vital part of the decline in theological theology and the grounding of economy within theology proper. Webster thus seeks to locate Christology itself in the wider story of God's immanent life external to creation and to ground the history of Jesus within his antecedent divinity as the eternal Son *a se*.

### Webster's critique of Protestant Christology in modernity

Webster's reading of Eberhard Jüngel – whose theology was the topic of his doctoral research – is illuminating in understanding some of Webster's early concerns with the shape of Protestant Christology in modernity.<sup>13</sup> In short, Webster believes that the basic instinct behind Jüngel's laudable attempt to account for 'the tension between historical knowledge and dogmatic responsibility' lies in something more problematic: a turn within modern theology which reduces Christ's life merely to its historical and empirical enclosures, and thereby underdetermines divine transcendence and perfection.<sup>14</sup> This early critique of modern Christology is maintained throughout Webster's later work even as his response to it – to ground Christology itself in God's aseity – shifts. Throughout his work, Webster maintains that the characteristically modern prioritisation of Jesus' human history inevitably undermines and collapses divine transcendence. This stands in contrast to the types of premodern theologies Webster believes accord a more definitive priority to the speculative metaphysics of the divine attributes and inter-trinitarian relations.

Such issues can be seen within Webster's account as deriving from the various Christologies of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism. For example, Webster identifies Albrecht Ritschl's 'deeply impressive' *Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* as a key turning point in the development of a Christology 'explicitly

<sup>11</sup>Webster, 'Omnia ... Pertractantur', p. 7.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>See e.g. John Webster, 'Jesus in Modernity: Reflections on Jüngel's Christology', in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 151–91. See also John Webster, 'Distinguishing Between God and Man: Aspects of the Theology of Eberhard Jüngel' (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1982).

<sup>14</sup>Within his christology, Jüngel argues that 'all dogmatic judgements in theology are related back to historical knowledge', given that 'God has revealed himself in the medium of historical events'. This means that, even within its metaphysical speculation, systematic theology is grounded within a particular kind of theological empiricism. Eberhard Jüngel, 'The Dogmatic Significance of the Question of the Historical Jesus', in *Theological Essays II*, trans. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast and John Webster (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), p. 83.

differentiated ... from classical theology'.<sup>15</sup> Through his appropriation of Kant's separation of the noumenal and phenomenal into the key of theology and economy, Ritschl's Christology problematically 'restricts itself to the effects of Christ in their reception by and formation of the moral existence of the community of faith'.<sup>16</sup> The consequence is that 'nothing is gained from speculation about the eternal Son as the cause of those effects' in understanding the life of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, '[s]tudy of the incarnate Word may not pass too quickly over his phenomenal form; but nor may it terminate there, for it must allow this human history to direct us to the triune God'.<sup>18</sup> An account of God's trinitarian life *a se* is therefore fundamental in correctly interpreting the history of Jesus and, by consequence, human history writ large.

Webster therefore argues that the modern instinct to tie theological knowledge to human history necessarily limits and restricts talk of God's freedom and sovereignty in and outside created space. This leads to a warped understanding of creaturely knowledge of God detached from the plenitude of God's being *a se*. Modern theology's desire to start from an examination of the historical life of Jesus without prior reference to his antecedent divinity leads to a theologically problematic understanding of the nature of history that reduces God's perfect and comprehensive being to God's outer works. To address modern theology's 'valorization of history as first reality', one must therefore take the reality of God's inner life as primary.<sup>19</sup> What follows for Webster is thus an attempt to redescribe history as a secondary reality to that which is more 'real': God *a se* and *in se*.

Webster therefore employs his two-tiered ordering of the theology–economy relation to his Christology. A properly theological Christology, then, is split into two domains: first, 'teaching about the eternal Son or Word, his deity and the relations which he bears to the Father and the Spirit', and second, and by derivation, 'teaching about the Son's temporal mission, especially in the assumption of flesh to redeem lost rational creatures'.<sup>20</sup> Christ's external works and mission must first be interpreted through prior exploration of the intertrinitarian relations of the eternal Son within the immanent Trinity. This does not mean that Jesus' history is unimportant to a well-ordered Christology. Rather, Webster seeks to offer a corrective to what he understands as the modern 'atrophy of the first domain of Christology and expansion of the second'.<sup>21</sup> Webster instead insists that Christology cannot risk being 'exhausted by the history of redemption' and 'is therefore only derivatively (yet also necessarily) an historical science'.<sup>22</sup> The first domain of Christology treats Christ's antecedent being as the ground and cause of his historical life. Thus, a 'well-ordered systematic theology' will draw out its account of the second order of Christology regarding the incarnate Son's economic activities by making 'appropriate backward reference to the material on the first domain'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay, 3 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902); Webster, 'Christology, Theology, and Economy', p. 55.

<sup>16</sup>Webster, 'Christology, Theology, and Economy', p. 55.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 51–2.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

For Webster, the deployment of a Christology in two domains substantiates his wider methodological concern that created things and creaturely life are prioritised and studied over and against a robust understanding of God *a se* as their necessary foundation. The result is that human history is misunderstood and overdetermined, undergirded by the assumption ‘that only the historical is the real’ and ‘that intellect can extend itself no further than the economy of texts or moral practice’.<sup>24</sup> The result is the inflation of human subjectivity in the theological task; as Katherine Sonderegger observes, Webster’s critique of modern Christology lies not so much in a neglect of the locus itself but rather in the ways it might be used ‘only as placeholder or symbol for what [Webster] took to be the real actor in modern theology: the human subject’.<sup>25</sup> By grounding Christ’s life in God *in se*, Webster thus seeks to displace Kantian modernity’s problematically universal knowing subject to forge a more theological theology.

The result, however, is that Webster risks idealising the redeemed capacities of creaturely knowledge of God in a way that furthers the very thing it seeks to avoid: the raising of a particular form of human subjectivity to the level of the universal. Within Webster’s overall theological method, once the practice of theology is determined appropriately theological (that is, grounded within an economy that points to God *in se*), it takes on a particular competence that risks idealising the cultural and historical enclosures of its own discourse and arrangement. Webster acknowledges that ‘talk of God *in se* may demonstrate immoderate confidence in the reach of created intellect, and neglect the fact that in creaturely knowledge of God there is always layer upon layer of tradition, custom, construction, categorization, schematization, [and] desire’.<sup>26</sup> Yet he argues that, as *theologia nostra*, theology must not ‘give disproportionate attention to intellectual depravity’.<sup>27</sup> Being ‘bestowed and preserved by God’ within the economy of salvation, redeemed intellectual capacities are in fact capable of apprehending God’s inner life *a se* which gives theology its unique ability to ‘understand reality in more than its sheer phenomenal presence’.<sup>28</sup> Theological theology, a form of theological subjectivity grounded in God’s inner life, is therefore ‘set free to begin to operate [at its] utmost extension’.<sup>29</sup> As we shall come to see, such an ascription of theological discourse can result in an overly competitive form of theological reasoning that seeks to universalise and thus marginalise other forms of theological knowing.

### Bonhoeffer and the sufficiency of theology’s ‘second domain’

In contrast to Webster’s grounding of theological theology within divine aseity, Bonhoeffer develops an understanding of God’s relative promeity – one’s encounter with God’s being *pro me* in the person of Jesus Christ – as the key moment in which human theological speech finds its voice. Human beings cannot begin to apprehend God divorced from this moment of encounter, lest they risk asserting their own

<sup>24</sup>Webster, ‘What Makes Theology Theological?’, p. 220.

<sup>25</sup>Katherine Sonderegger, ‘Jesus Christ’, in Michael Allen and R. David Nelson (eds), *A Companion to the Theology of John Webster* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2021), p. 209.

<sup>26</sup>Webster, ‘*Omnia ... Pertractantur*’, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup>Webster, ‘What Makes Theology Theological?’, p. 218.

<sup>28</sup>While the fall impairs human intellect for Webster, its subsequent regeneration justifies its free speculation within theology’s first domain. Indeed, it is modern intellectual culture’s ‘fascination with surfaces’ and secondary things that he believes might most characterise reason’s fallen state. See Webster, ‘What Makes Theology Theological?’, p. 218.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*



will and mastery over God's transcendent Word. In terms developed by Webster, then, Bonhoeffer believes in the sufficiency of the second domain of theology as the moment in which God actually encounters human beings and thereby determines faithful theological speech.

Importantly, Bonhoeffer affirms the sufficiency of theology's second domain not because he believes theological knowledge is in any way natural to human beings but rather because he believes divine freedom and sovereignty is expressed most completely by God's becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ. As he writes in *Act and Being*,

In revelation it is not so much a question of the freedom of God – eternally remaining within the divine self, aseity – on the other side of revelation, as it is of God's coming out of God's own self in revelation. It is a matter of God's *given* Word, the covenant in which God is bound by God's own action. It is a question of the freedom of God, which finds its strongest evidence precisely in that God freely chose to be bound to the historical human being ... God is free not from human beings but for them.<sup>30</sup>

In one sense, Webster might agree: God, in God's freedom, is of course for us, but this being-for-us arises only out of the more fundamental plenitude of God's inner life. Aseity, for Webster, grounds and determines promise. Bonhoeffer's concern lies elsewhere, namely in asserting that God's freedom is expressed most fully to human beings through the person of Jesus Christ *pro nobis*. It is therefore in this moment of existential encounter with Christ in which creaturely knowledge of God begins.

This means that theology's primary concern lies not with the 'relation of God and human in Jesus Christ' – parsing out divine and human domains in any neat or linear way – but 'rather the relation of the God-human, as already given, to the ὁμοίωμα σαρκός' (cf. Rom 8:3).<sup>31</sup> This is why, for Bonhoeffer, Christology must begin from the perspective of a 'who' question as opposed to a 'how' question – by asking 'who' God is as the one we meet in the risen and ascended Christ, theology thus begins with God's given yet transcendent Word to human beings. Deriving speculative ideas about God external to the form of Christ's incarnation can therefore represent a problematic overreaching of human reason; instead, God in Christ is a stumbling block to human ideas about God. When theology says, 'God becoming human (*das Menschwerden*)', the grammar seems to suggest we know who God is before God became human, assimilating God into a preconditioned category of human reason. Rather, theology must speak of 'God who became human (*der Menschgewordene*)'.<sup>32</sup> Theology's first word, then, is that 'God ... truly became a human being', and that 'God *remains* human even after the judgement'.<sup>33</sup> 'Why does that sound so improbable and strange to us?' Bonhoeffer asks. 'Because God's becoming human in Jesus Christ does not visibly glorify God; because God who became human is the Crucified One.'<sup>34</sup> Because of this hiddenness, there is a danger in forms of ideological thinking

<sup>30</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., trans. H. R. Rumscheidt (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 90–1.

<sup>31</sup>Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology', p. 313.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 354.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 338, 355 (emphasis added).

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 355.



which seek to predetermine the manner of God's becoming human, a manner which human beings do not expect and cannot anticipate.

Bonhoeffer's Christology is thus determined by Christ's intrusive, risen presence that gives rise to theological speech, seeking to acknowledge the ways in which such a presence is often confusing and disorientating for human beings. (Bonhoeffer's christological priority here, I contend, does not have to be read as necessarily detrimental to a speculative theology of aseity – the grounding of theological knowledge itself within theology's second domain may still lead to speculation within its first. It must, however, be acknowledged that Bonhoeffer himself shares in a type of Ritschlian aversion to metaphysics.<sup>35</sup>) Theology accords priority to its second domain not because it falsely assumes history as first reality but rather because such history is the place in which God most fully expresses Godself to human beings in the person of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer's worry lies in the ways in which speculative thinking can seek to overdetermine and predict divine action and thereby assert human will and mastery over divine agency. It is precisely to protect divine freedom that theology must become a student of the cross: recognising that God's actions in the world often occur at the very places human beings reject or ignore. As such, theological discourse itself is held under divine judgement which neither theological nor ideological speculation may make claim over. It is God's claim over us, a claim most fully expressed in the resurrected and ascended Christ, to which creaturely knowledge of God must be brought back again and again. Priority, then, must be afforded to divine promise as the concrete moment of chastening encounter with God that determines creaturely speech of God.

The dangers of ideological mastery over God's will is a vital part of Bonhoeffer's own criticism of liberal Protestant theology and its appropriation of post-Kantian Enlightenment. Enlightenment thought, Bonhoeffer contends, is useful in examining truth only within its own preconditioned categories of knowing, categories and generalisations which are inevitably finite. This is because 'thinking in itself is a closed circle, with the ego at its centre'.<sup>36</sup> Such modern rationality therefore 'has to call itself the ultimate reality, and in this system the thinking ego rules'.<sup>37</sup> The supposed mastery of such *ratio in se ipsam incurvata* therefore seeks to take hold and make claims of God's transcendent Word, asserting human rationality as the creator of truthful knowledge over and above God's self-communication to human beings.<sup>38</sup> What is needed is an external word which breaks open the self-reflexivity of human reason. Christ, then, comes as the complete disruption of reason turned in on itself, addressing humankind as the counter-Logos to our own rational human logos. The human logos does not want to submit to the counter-Logos, and so crucifies him. Yet Christ, as the risen Lord, 'rises up to meet [his] murderers and rushes at them again, appearing as the Resurrected One

<sup>35</sup>For one critical yet sympathetic metaphysical appropriation of Bonhoeffer's christology, see Christopher R. J. Holmes, 'Beyond Bonhoeffer in Loyalty to Bonhoeffer: Reconsidering Bonhoeffer's Christological Aversion to Metaphysics', in Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (eds), *Christ, Church and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 29–43.

<sup>36</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Concerning the Christian Idea of God', in *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928–1931*, vol. 10 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Clifford Green, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 452.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 453.

<sup>38</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, pp. 41–2.

who has overcome death'.<sup>39</sup> In place of a transcendent universal human subject, it is God's transcendent Word which gives rise to and rightly orders theological speech. Theology is thus repeatedly summoned to the startling presence and contemporaneity of the risen Christ who chastens and purges human pretence of control and clarity.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of first theological foundations therefore arises out of his critique of liberal Protestant theology and its appropriation of Kantian Enlightenment and subjectivity. Bonhoeffer and Webster's respective analyses of Protestant theology in European modernity thus reflect similar concerns. The two come particularly close, for example, in spying out the ways in which Enlightenment thinking strips theology of its dogmatic content and naturalises its tasks and origins by asserting a boundless, but abstract, rational investigation into the divine within its own self-reference. God cannot therefore be understood as the primary agent within theological intellect, rejecting the central place of divine transcendence and activity within creaturely knowledge of God. If Webster and Bonhoeffer share diagnoses regarding various issues associated with the shape of theology in modernity, however, their prescriptions for how to address this problem differ in important ways. Where Webster seeks to ground first theological foundations in a fairly stable understanding of divine aseity and the immanent Trinity, Bonhoeffer emphasises the *destabilising* presence of God's *promevity* in Jesus Christ. Where Webster emphasises the need to ground theological speech within theology's first domain to safeguard against theological naturalisation, Bonhoeffer emphasises the need to ground theological speech within theology's second domain to safeguard against theological idolatry and mastery.

### Aseity or promevity: The theological architecture of transcendence

Webster and Bonhoeffer are therefore two theologians who share a common desire to ground creaturely knowledge of God in divine transcendence. Both agree that theology is only possible because God chooses to share Godself with creatures while remaining transcendent and beyond creatures. Yet the way they articulate and develop transcendence through the concepts of aseity and promevity results in profoundly different approaches to systematic theological architecture. Webster is most concerned with the way modern theology, especially within the locus of Christology, naturalises creaturely knowledge of God by deriving theology proper from created things. This leads him to set up a clear delineation between first and second domains within systematic theology in which the second domain is subordinated to the first, thus ordering the theology–economy relation and placing theological knowledge itself within the more fundamental reality of God's life *a se*. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, seeks to ground first theology within an encounter with Christ as God *pro me*. Theological discourse itself, for Bonhoeffer, as it is conducted by human beings, takes place within the second domain of reality in which the self-reflexivity of human reason is broken open in order to determine faithful theological speech. Attention to theology's second domain

<sup>39</sup>Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology', p. 305. Bonhoeffer's language of Christ as disruption of human enterprise and rational self-seeking finds some resonance with Webster's earlier explorations on the nature of theological knowledge. In his Thomas Burns Memorial Lectures (later published as *The Culture of Theology*), Webster opens by asserting that 'Christian theology, emerges out of the shock of the gospel ... tak[ing] its rise in the comprehensive interruption of all things in Jesus Christ ... the great catastrophe of human life and history.' See John Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, ed. Ivor J. Davidson and Alden C. McCray (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), p. 43. The apocalyptic flair present here is heavily muted in Webster's late theology.

remains vital in order that theologians remain accountable to the 'Word of God, which has been revealed right here in this world'.<sup>40</sup>

The foundational relationship between theology's first and second domains, therefore, can determine one's conception of the ways in which systematic theology ought to be approached, arranged and developed. Through his account of God's immanent life as the ground of God's temporal acts, Webster helps remind Bonhoeffer about the dangers of too closely identifying God's economic activities with God's eternal trinity. Divine transcendence cannot be collapsed into the economy in ways that ultimately tie theological knowing to certain conceptions of historical existence or limit talk of God's being to God's actions insofar as they relate to humanity.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, the danger of Webster's approach is in the way his reordering of creaturely knowledge of God within *theologia in se* can elide the historical and enculturated nature of the material discourse of theology as it is conducted by human creatures in time and space. In short, Webster's grounding of first theology within aseity lacks robust understanding of its own particularity as a form of theological arrangement and subjectivity. Webster is not unaware of such dangers; his given solution, however – to merely affirm the positive intellectual capacities of sanctified and regenerate rationality – does not entirely resolve the problem. Theological knowledge may indeed be caught up in a process of sanctification, yet it is still a form of sanctified knowledge transmitted and developed across the entanglements of human history, discourse and limitation. For all its explanatory brilliance, Webster's account of theological theology lacks a robust ability to make sense of its own socio-cultural realities.

The resulting danger is that Webster's account of theological theology risks idealising what is, in the end, a particular set of encultured theological practices and subjectivity that renders itself universal. Such problems might be observed within Webster's review of David Ford's *Self and Salvation*.<sup>42</sup> Within the review, Webster argues that the theological approach Ford represents is not a form of 'straight systematics' but an (implicitly obtuse) reflection on Christian themes through polyphonic conversation with leading cultural theory and studies.<sup>43</sup> Theological theology must instead be disciplined to listen to a more controlled and necessarily limited range of voices given that, Webster asserts, 'polyphony tends to go hand in hand with a lack of interest in the architecture, both intellectual and spiritual, of classical dogmatics'.<sup>44</sup> The resultant theological method Webster has in mind – a more restricted, disciplined explication of doctrinal *loci* ordered along the lines of divine aseity – makes theology less 'compellingly interesting' (novelty, for Webster, being a typically modern theological vice) that seeks to engage the theologian in 'a kind of ascesis', an '*inattention* to all sorts of stimuli' that 'in the end break our wills and so teach us true joy'.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'What Should a Student of Theology Do Today?', in *DBWE* 12, p. 433.

<sup>41</sup>Such danger is particularly acute e.g. within his 1933 Christology lectures, where Bonhoeffer argues that the 'being of Christ's person is essentially relatedness to me ... Christ is not in-himself and also in the church-community, but the Christ who is the only Christ is the one present in the church-community *pro-me*.' See Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology', p. 314.

<sup>42</sup>See: John Webster, 'Review: David F. Ford: *Self and Salvation*'; and David F. Ford, 'Salvation and the Nature of Theology: A Response to John Webster's Review of *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54/4 (2001): pp. 548–59, 560–75.

<sup>43</sup>Webster, 'Review', p. 548.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.* That is to say nothing of the exact scope and definition of 'classical dogmatics', an imprecise term at best.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 553, 559.

Webster's vision here highlights an important facet of what his understanding of theological theology entails: theology need not be anxiously determined by or even conversant with leading cultural theory or interdisciplinary conversation in order that it might be more politely presented to the modern academy. Instead, theology's particular contribution lies elsewhere, namely within an appeal to its own distinct traditions and ways of speaking of God. Read less generously, however, Webster's criticism can further one, exclusive type of theological practice and enculturation that seeks to defend itself and thus colonise other forms of theological arrangement or discussion.<sup>46</sup> Theological theology can then be conducted within an idealised form of discourse detached from the specific contextual decisions it has invested in to permit for such abstraction.<sup>47</sup> Having done this, theological theology renders alternative forms of discourse as transgressions of its supposed universal status. Ford himself responds to Webster's review by pointing out that such a narrow vision of 'straight systematics' not only excludes many significant figures from the Christian tradition but that, more importantly, a variety of approaches to the receiving and teaching of systematic theology may be required for the flourishing of the discipline. The crux of the issue 'is not whether [Webster's] alternative way is worthwhile but whether it is normative in a way that excludes others'.<sup>48</sup> As Ford concludes, the 'theological city needs many types of architecture'.<sup>49</sup>

When theology is determined and arranged from within its first domain it risks being detached from an account of its own historical particularities that can idealise its discourse. Theology's *positum* does not negate its historical and cultural enclosures nor justify notions of universality. Such dangers lurk in theologies which accord primacy to God's life *in se*; indeed, recent appeals to Webster's theological method have been accompanied by problematically universalist assumptions.<sup>50</sup> Theology thus

<sup>46</sup>On this point, see Linn Tonstad's critique of appeals to theology's ability to rule over neighbouring disciplines within the modern academy, including Webster's account of theological theology, in Linn Marie Tonstad, '(Un)wise Theologians: Systematic Theology in the University', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22/4 (2020), pp. 494–511.

<sup>47</sup>It is illuminating here to note the dichotomy Webster develops between theology's 'context' and theology's 'occasion'. Webster argues that, while 'attention to "context" can remind theology that there is no pure language of Zion', contextual theologies 'at [their] worst' are 'a form of mental and spiritual laziness' that represent an 'unwillingness to admit that theology must go about its own business if it is to speak prophetically and compassionately about the gospel to its neighbour' (Webster, *Word and Church*, p. 5). Ongoing tensions within this (troublingly supremacist) characterisation of theologies which explicitly raise context as determinative for theological method remain: how is theology meant to distinguish between or even analyse its 'context' or 'occasion' when, per Webster's own argument, theological theology ought not take empirical or cultural observation seriously?

<sup>48</sup>Ford, 'Salvation', p. 561.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 574.

<sup>50</sup>Certain trajectories of universalisation can be identified within recent interpretations of Webster's theological method. Commenting on the Thomas Burns Lectures, Michael Allen e.g. writes: 'While post-moderns might turn to the power politics in contextualization and postliberals rest upon the deep grammar of a linguistic community, Webster said that "a theological account of tradition is a matter of tracing the permanent revolution to which the gospel gives rise." Apostolicity, not community grammar and certainly not ethnographic identity politics, is the watchword for ecclesiological specificity.' By contrasting between communal practices or identities to a certain, supposedly universal, conception of Christian tradition, Allen reveals an implicit assumption about how theology ought to operate; by raising one's own appeal to tradition to the level of 'apostolic' or universal, one not only (falsely) claims to be above any one particularly enculturated 'community grammar' or 'identity politics', but also that 'other' perspectives therefore represent a transgression or break in continuity of the Christian tradition. This tying of theological or ecclesial systems to concepts such as apostolicity, as John Flett has shown, can lead to the privileging of certain

ought to move more carefully between its metaphysical speculation and attention to, for lack of a better phrase, concrete or historical matters, given the ways in which such speculation can universalise and overdetermine one's own cultural and historical boundedness. Bonhoeffer, then, represents one alternative theological method which nonetheless seeks to prioritise divine transcendence against the dangers of theological naturalisation. Within his emphasis on divine promise, Bonhoeffer is primarily concerned, not with extended speculation on God's eternal being, but rather focusing theological attention on the existential moment of encounter with Christ. Theologies such as Bonhoeffer's which accord primacy to God's being *pro me* therefore seek to acknowledge the way in which all theological speech must be determined from the moment of chastening encounter with Christ in which (false) human ideas about God are set to rights. The shape of theological architecture, therefore, is open to a diversity and multiplicity of systemisation and arrangement; to anticipate or determine this encounter for another is to usurp the particular claim of God who alone determines faithful human speech.

This, of course, does not absolve Bonhoeffer himself of issues related to too closely identifying God's immanent being with God's external works.<sup>51</sup> It might be best therefore, to examine the relationship between the first and second domains within theological knowing in less dualistic and neat ways, resisting the temptation to draw theological architecture either completely into the realm of metaphysical speculation (Webster) or to tie theological knowing exclusively to concrete, historical existence (Bonhoeffer). The tension between the transcendence of God and the particularities of its own human history and discourse therefore remains just that, a *tension* to which systematic theology must attend. Following Bonhoeffer, responsible theological speech arises from the ongoing wrestling with God in Christ when, 'in the midst of questioning and seeking, human beings encounter the cross' and thus 'realize that their entire vitality stands under judgment'.<sup>52</sup> Such an encounter must surely draw creaturely knowledge of God into the materiality of life amidst the *pro me* structure of historical existence, but it also may simultaneously invite creatures to contemplate God *a se* as this history's necessary ground. Through such wrestling and dedicated attention to both first and second domains, faithful theological speech may be wrought.

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types of Eurocentric perspectives. Such a move is not only complicated by the often non-linear or transgressive historical developments of orthodoxy itself, but also by the active exclusion and marginalisation of majority world perspectives. See Michael Allen, 'Reason', in *Companion to Webster*, pp. 133–4; John Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016). While one cannot necessarily criticise another's work based on its reception, it nonetheless indicates something important about the ways Webster's theological method might be employed to universalising ends. It is notable that Webster himself rarely appeals to modern theologians or theological traditions outside of Europe.

<sup>51</sup>In this way, Bonhoeffer remains a distinctively 'modern' theologian, insofar as that typology might be defined by Webster.

<sup>52</sup>Bonhoeffer, 'What Should a Student of Theology Do', p. 433.

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