

Being constructive: An interview with John Webster

by [Jason Byassee](#)

This article appears in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue.

One of the world's leading Reformed theologians, John Webster, has focused his study on the works of Eberhard Jüngel and Karl Barth (he edited the Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth) and on the theological interpretation of scripture (a commentary on Ephesians is forthcoming). He is working on his own multivolume systematic theology. He cofounded (with Colin Gunton) the International Journal of Systematic Theology and is a coeditor of the Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology. He taught at the Toronto School of Theology and Oxford University before taking up his current post at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland.

There seems to be renewed interest in systematic theology over the past decade or two. How would you account for that?

The renewed confidence that constructive theology is possible and worthwhile is probably the biggest change in theological culture since I was a graduate student in the late 1970s. The confidence has many roots: the steady decline of models of theology in which “critical appraisal” is the dominant task; receptiveness toward and fresh engagement with classical thinkers, patristic, medieval and Reformation; a sense that the Enlightenment is only one episode in the history of one (Western) culture and not a turning point in the history of humankind; the work of a number of gifted and independent-minded theologians now at the height of their powers who have shown the potency of constructive doctrinal work.

That being said, the renewal of interest ought not to be overstated: much doctrinal theology in English remains preoccupied with keeping up a conversation with other fields of inquiry (often literary and cultural theory) and is so eager to do so that it often neglects the descriptive or dogmatic tasks of systematics.

In your work on the theology of scripture you have had negative things to say about historical criticism when it's regarded as the lone means of

accessing truth about Jesus. How does the historical-critical approach hinder rather than help efforts to get at who Jesus “really was”?

Historical criticism is not a single entity but a family of approaches to texts and religious history. Constructive Christology has much to learn from what historians can tell us about the temporal realities into which the eternal Word descended. But for the past two centuries, historical study of Christian origins has been plagued by historical naturalism, which converts the history of Jesus into one more temporal state of affairs. And this naturalism means that something basic to the church’s confession about Christ is missed—the fact that the history of Jesus is what it is only because it is rooted in God’s being in a direct and immediate way.

To say that Jesus is God incarnate is to say that there is a history of Jesus only because in it God’s very being reaches out to us; only because of that outreach of the divine being is there this historical figure, and only on that basis can his history be known for what it is. Put differently: incarnation goes all the way down; it’s not something added onto a more basic historical reality. Without the movement of God’s unrestricted love and self-giving, without the Son’s eternal obedience to the Father, there is no history of Jesus.

And so historians who seek to find a Jesus of history *behind* the incarnate one of the apostolic Gospels are looking for a figure who doesn’t exist. If that’s so, then the church’s conceptual formulation of its confession of Christ—its dogma—doesn’t obscure Jesus so much as tell us who he is, what’s going on in his history: God’s very life is being borne to us.

Karl Barth looms large in your writings. What aspects of his theology, or what accounts of his theology, do you especially seek to engage?

Barth’s work is still in the process of reception (as might be expected from a corpus of texts of such range and depth). Many readings of him (especially hostile ones) are often not thoroughly acquainted with his work, and so tend to promote caricatures. I’ve tried to look at him whole, and to let him explicate himself before moving on to appraisal.

From the beginning, it’s been common for many readers of Barth to worry about the apparent one-sidedness of his descriptions of the sheer plenitude of God. Perhaps Barth thinks that God’s glory has to be maintained at a cost to creatures. Nowadays this worry is often expressed by speaking of Barth’s supposed “extrinsicism,” that is,

his presentation of the Christian faith in terms of an encounter (or collision) of divine and human wills in which creatures are kept separate from God's being.

I've tried to suggest that this isn't really the case. From the beginning Barth was deeply interested in the reality of creatures and their acts, and he conceived of Christianity as concerned with the active fellowship between God and creatures. He is, I think, a *moral* theologian. My interest in Barth as moral theologian suggests to me that his interpretation of the Reformed tradition (as equally concerned with God's glory and the free action of creatures) was deeply important in his theological growth.

Finally, we can learn much about Barth (and, of course, other great Christian thinkers) by watching how he interprets scripture; work at this task is still underdeveloped.

Why should ordinary Christians care about such seemingly recondite matters as how to articulate the immanent being of the Trinity?

There aren't any "ordinary" Christians; there are saints, a few of whom are appointed to the task of thinking hard about and trying to articulate the common faith of the church. We don't usually need to use formal theological language and concepts in the everyday life of the church in prayer, preaching and service.

But like any other important human activity, faith has to achieve a measure of conceptual clarity if it is to understand and express itself, and part of that process is the development of abstract concepts like Trinity, incarnation and substance. What's important is that we don't treat such concepts as if they were improvements on the ordinary ways in which the saints express the faith; they are simply shorthand terms, a tool kit which helps us keep certain crucial aspects of the gospel alive in the mind and worship of the church. Theology and theological abstractions matter because the gospel matters, because the gospel concerns truth, and because living in and from the truth involves the discipleship of reason.

Does theology have anything to fear—or learn—from the "new atheists" such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens?

The saints fear God, not their opponents, because God's good and gentle rule outbids all that opposes the gospel. The "new atheism" looks to me pretty much like old atheism, but it is more aggressive, less historically informed and woefully

ignorant of what Christians (and other religious practitioners) actually say and think. Compared with serious critiques from the past, much new atheism reads more like a tantrum than an argument.

But we have to distinguish atheism from atheists; atheists are our fellow creatures, like us the children of Adam, and we do well to listen to them with care, to confess our shortcomings, and also to look them in the eye with cheerful confidence and friendliness and explain as simply as we can how the gospel witnesses to God's gift of life.

If you were just starting out in theology today, what topics and issues would you want to tackle?

What I didn't get round to doing when I set out: lots of exegesis, lots of historical theology, mastering the big texts of the traditions of the church. Then I'd be better able to figure out what to do with whatever showed up than I am as I stumble around now trying to work out what I should be about.

What current trends in theology give you hope?

Theological interpretation of scripture (when it is not burdened by large-scale hermeneutical theory or an inflated ecclesiology); historical theology (especially when animated by astonishment at the gifts which the Spirit has given to the saints through the great thinkers of the past); systematics (when it sets aside anxieties about relevance or plausibility and gives itself to the task of loving description of the gospel).

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