

**A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE HOLINESS OF GOD IN THE  
THEOLOGY OF JOHN WEBSTER**

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**MAY 2019**

**This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of**

**Master of Theology (MTh) Pathway 2.**

## **DECLARATION**

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## ABSTRACT

In classical Reformed dogmatics the holiness of God has been understood as referring simultaneously to the ontological transcendence and moral purity of the divine being, locating it as an attribute inherently proper to the immanent Trinity. Current systematics, influenced by the contributions of Barth, have seen a reorientation of the attributes based on a greater emphasis on the economy, which has resulted in numerous proposed redefinitions of divine holiness related to the freedom of God in his acts of revelation and grace.

The current project seeks to evaluate the theology of the holiness of God as presented by John Webster with principle reference to his monograph *Holiness* to determine whether his work on this subject adheres to and fulfils the vision for systematics that he presents in his broader work. Of particular interest is whether Webster's presentation of divine holiness as a relational attribute that provides the nexus between the immanent and economic Trinity in "God the Holy One in our midst" may be regarded as coherent. Webster's work will be examined to determine to what extent it exhibits both formal coherence (i.e. it corresponds with the form of systematics that he advocates) and material coherence (i.e. his particular conclusions are supported by the standards which he sets for himself).

Chapter Two of this project presents an overview of Webster's theological vision and key principles with reference to the place of systematic theology within the academy, the nature of the authority of scripture, and his preferred definition of systematics as redeemed thinking in the presence of God. Chapter three reviews Webster's broader work on the doctrine of God against the background of the Reformed tradition and Webster's engagement with the topic within the context of post-Barthian systematics. Chapter Four examines Webster's presentation of a threefold formula for the holiness of God – in his triune identity, in his works, and as the holy one in our midst – as presented in the *Holiness* monograph, and concludes that while Webster's presentation manifests formal coherence with his theological vision his attempt at an exegetical systematic is inconsistent at key points and thus has not been sufficiently demonstrated as meeting the requirements to be considered materially coherent. Chapter five continues the analysis of Webster's presentation of the holiness of God as evidenced in the holiness of the church and individual Christian, similarly concluding that Webster's theology appears formally coherent but cannot be conclusively deemed materially coherent owing to inconsistency in the exegetical warrant for several of Webster's conclusions. Chapter six summarises the analysis of Webster's work presented in the prior chapters and suggests avenues for future research in the theology of the divine attributes in general and the holiness of God and the church in particular.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks and appreciation go to my supervisor, Dr David Höhne, for all his advice and support during the writing of this project and for his help in understanding the world of post-Barthian trinitarian systematics. Additional thanks must also go to Dr Mark Thompson, whose suggestions regarding the analysis of Webster's methods and conclusions were very influential on the final form of this project.

Thanks to the staff of Moore Theological College and its library for their assistance with the research and administrative requirements for this project.

Thanks to my friend Dr Roland Clark of the University of Liverpool for the gift of a copy of his translation of Dumitru Staniloae's monograph.

Thanks to Rev Daniel Webster for proofreading the final draft.

Thanks to my brothers and sisters in Christ at the parishes of Rosemeadow, Revesby, West Lindfield, and Moranbah who have supported me practically and prayerfully over the time that this project was conceived and written.

Lastly, my loving gratitude must go to my family, particularly my parents Graeme and Colleen, my wife Julia, and my children Bede, Tabitha, and Silas. Your support and encouragement over the ups and downs of this project has meant the world to me.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ATR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
CC	Calvin's Commentaries
<i>CC</i>	<i>Christian Century</i>
<i>CD</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i>
DDCT	Distinguished Dissertations in Christian Theology
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>IJST</i>	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
IST	Issues in Systematic Theology
<i>ITQ</i>	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JRT</i>	<i>Journal of Reformed Theology</i>
JTC	Journal for Theology and the Church
<i>LCC</i>	<i>Library of Christian Classics</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>Modern Theology</i>
NZSTR	<i>Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie</i>
OCT	Outstanding Christian Thinkers
<i>PRS</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
PTM	Paternoster Theological Monographs
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>

SRTL	Students' Reformed Theological Library
<i>TJT</i>	<i>Toronto Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
WBC	Westminster Bible Companion
<i>ZDT</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie</i>

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

To assert that God is Holy might appear to be the most self-evident of truths. In Scripture God declares himself to be holy (Lev 11:44) and is extolled and celebrated as holy by angels (Isa 6:3) and humanity (Exod 15:11). However, the exact nature of divine holiness has historically seen little critical engagement. Within traditional dogmatics close speculation on the divine being and nature was restrained by a commitment to the transcendence and ontological dichotomy between Creator and Creature, and thus language regarding the holiness of God was intrinsically understood to denote this utter otherness and separation, a personal centre which the mortal mind could not possibly fathom.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, divine holiness has been commonly regarded in orthodox Reformed systematics as the principle impediment to relations between the Holy and Unholy. As summarised recently by Gerald Bray:

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Walter Brueggemann on the song of the heavenly choir in Isaiah 6: “It sings of the holiness, the splendour, the glory, the unutterable majesty of the ruler of heaven whose awesome governance extends over all the earth... This moment of praise (which the prophet observes) is indeed an event behind which it is not possible to go for explanation. We are here at the core of holiness from which is decreed all that happens everywhere in creation. The song of the heavenly choir begins in holiness and ends in glory, both terms acknowledging the odd, overwhelming otherness of God. The attempt to verbalize the effect of God’s holiness evidences that God’s presence is incalculable, before which everything must yield.” In *Isaiah 1-39* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 58-59.

In a world that has fallen into the grip of evil forces to which even human beings are subject, God stands out as someone who is not only completely different but whose demands on us run counter to what have now become our “natural” inclinations. In practical terms, God’s holiness is that aspect of his nature which *makes it impossible for us, his disobedient creatures, to enjoy fellowship with him.*<sup>2</sup>

Thus, whether in the Church or the Academy, “holiness” has conventionally been practically regarded as an attribute more fit for confession than contemplation.

Modern systematics have witnessed a renewed interest in Trinitarian theology and the doctrine of the divine attributes, which has prompted the nature of divine holiness to be the subject of fresh consideration. Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the classic Reformed position underwent a challenge by new liberal perspectives, which instinctively withdrew from strict dogmatic formulations of divine being and attributes in favour of expressions of God-consciousness. While more classically Reformed apologists attempted to retain the centrality of divine mystery for understanding the attributes the debate witness little progress until the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Karl Barth’s work on the doctrine and knowledge of God in *Church Dogmatics*, in particular volume II/1, was instrumental in reshaping the parameters

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald Bray, *God is Love: a Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 160 (emphasis mine).

of the debate as he sought to expound a formulation for understanding the divine being that would do justice to the full witness of Scripture in accounting for the reality of God who encounters creation personally in the incarnate Son. Barth recast the characteristics of God, such as his holiness, as “perfections” which are grounded in both Freedom and Love as opposed to as “attributes”, which would imply material characteristics that are attributed to him by humanity.<sup>3</sup> Such perspectives would become foundational for the work of subsequent systematic treatments which would increasingly orient divine attributes, including holiness, with respect to economic action and away from the immanence central to classical orthodox formulations.<sup>4</sup>

More recently the late systematician John Webster addressed the nature of divine holiness as a facet of his work on the doctrine of God more broadly. In the monograph *Holiness* from 2003 John Webster proposes the following definition for the holiness of God:

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1* (eds. G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 344-347.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Colin E. Gunton, *Act & Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Eberhardt Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth* (trans. John Webster; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001); Bruce McCormack, “The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism”, in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (ed. Bruce L. McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 185-242.

God's holiness is the holiness of Father, Son and Spirit, the one who bears his holy name, who is holy in all his works, and who is the Holy One in our midst, establishing, maintaining, and perfecting righteous fellowship with the holy people of God.<sup>5</sup>

In this statement Webster affirms the historically orthodox place for holiness as applied to the transcendent inner life of the immanent Trinity in addition to the reconciling and perfecting actions of the economic Trinity found in the works of the post-Barthians. Webster deviated from his contemporaries, however, by employing the accepted parameters to support a recasting of divine holiness as a principally relational attribute. This determines the proper sphere of covenant fellowship as being among (rather than apart from) the redeemed community. Webster's analysis and integration of historic and contemporary approaches and the manner in which he does so represented an original contribution to the systematic understanding of God and the Attributes.

To date Webster's theology of divine holiness has received little close examination, though his contributions to contemporary systematics have been broadly appreciated. Specifically, it is yet unresolved to what extent Webster's published systematic work on divine holiness conforms to his broader dogmatic vision or his

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<sup>5</sup> John Webster, *Holiness* (London: SCM, 2003), 32.

particular work on the doctrine of God. Webster's planned multi-volume systematics remained incomplete and unpublished at the time of his death, and ideally it would have been in that context that his formulation of the divine attributes and holiness would have been evaluated. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern his dogmatic approach and priorities not only with respect to the attributes but his broader dogmatic schema from his existing corpus.

Webster's formula may be more naturally comprehended when his dogmatic approach to the doctrine of God is remembered. That is, Webster endeavoured to achieve systematic common ground through a unity between the classical theism of the Reformed tradition and the contributions of his contemporary post-Barthian context. This method is grounded in Webster's expressed conviction across his more mature published work that the task of dogmatics exists as an exercise of redeemed thinking and reflection on Scripture within the redeemed community rather than as a pursuit of the academy. As a result, Webster endeavoured to read the biblical evidence alongside an exceptionally broad range of theological traditions (including the scholasticism of Aquinas, the Reformed Calvin, and a range of modern perspectives from Lutheran to Orthodox) in order to construct a robust matrix for discussing God and the divine attributes while providing him with the warrant to recast holiness as a relational attribute. While contemporary systematics have tended to question whether the orthodox categories and approaches necessarily become metaphysically ruinous for a coherent systematic,

Webster's focus on aseity as central to the doctrine of God broadly suggests that he does not concede this point. In an attempt to reconcile the immanent perspectives of classical theism with the actualist framework of Barthian dogmatics, Webster proposes that God's holiness is not only to be found in the Trinitarian nature of the divine being, but also in that God is "the holy one in our midst" to orient the discourse regarding the divine nature towards the reality of God in active relational engagement with the Church.

The current project will critically evaluate John Webster's proposed definition of the holiness of God to determine to what extent his methods and conclusions are consistent with the theological vision and method that he advocates in his systematic works more broadly. The analysis will have two primary measures. First, the extent to which Webster's thesis demonstrates formal coherence to the pattern of systematics which he advocates in his wider doctrinal work (i.e. whether Webster's dogmatic structure and concerns with respect to divine holiness are consistent with the systematic aims advocated for in his broader work). Second, the extent to which Webster's understanding of divine holiness displays material coherence (i.e. whether Webster's theses regarding the nature of divine holiness are appropriately supported). Of particular interest will be the extent to which

Webster's use of and engagement with Holy Scripture and both historical and contemporary systematic perspectives support his conclusions.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter Two of this study will provide an overview of the facets and priorities that have shaped Webster's approach to systematic theology concentrating on his works published since the mid-1990s.<sup>7</sup> Particular attention will be given to Webster's advocacy of a distinctly "theological theology" and his view on the role of Scripture as authoritative for the exercise of dogmatics in order to clarify the specific principles by which Webster believes true theology should operate.

Chapter Three will review Webster's work on the theology of the divine attributes and aseity as the more specific dogmatic context in which Webster will construct his perspective on divine holiness. Chapter Four will evaluate Webster's systematic treatment of the holiness of God proper as presented in his monograph *Holiness* to

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<sup>6</sup> As will be addressed in Chapter Two, Webster's dogmatic method centres on the theological interpretation of Scripture whereby God is perceived as addressing the community of faith. Thus, for Webster, the task of theology is primarily ecclesiological rather than academic. His approach is not dissimilar to that recently employed in the prologue of a more fulsome study on the divine nature by Sonderegger, who states, "The aim, here is not to incorporate "tradition" – scholastic or otherwise – into a ranker order, where primacy of place is reserved for Holy Writ. To be sure, we do not scorn the aid of the great schoolmen, or of the tradition of the doctors of the church: we are grateful for these witnesses and their instruction... Rather, the doctrine that follows in this volume seeks to listen to Holy Scripture, to feed on it, and from its riches, to bring forth the Divine Perfections of the One God. We seek to confess who and what God is in biblical idiom, guidance, and subject matter." See Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology – Volume 1: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), xv-xvi.

<sup>7</sup> The present study will not attempt a comprehensive study on the development of Webster's systematic thought across his total published works. While the genesis of Webster's method may be discerned in his earlier work engaging with Eberhardt Jüngel and Karl Barth, the present study is primarily concerned with Webster's matured systematic method as operating during the period his key works on the doctrine of God and the attribute of holiness were composed.

determine to what extent Webster's definition displays both formal and material coherence with the systematic standards that he has set in his theological method. Chapter Five will continue to evaluate Webster's definition of the holiness of God as functioning as a relational attribute as applied to the holiness of the Church and the Individual. Chapter Six will summarise the evaluation of Webster's treatment of divine holiness and consider avenues for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE THEOLOGICAL METHOD OF JOHN WEBSTER

Before a fulsome examination of his views on the divine attributes and holiness can commence it will be necessary to closely review the shape of the theological method and priorities to which Webster conforms his systematic theses more broadly. The nature and aims of contemporary systematics within the Academy and the evolving relationship between the task of theology and its implementation in the community of faith might be said to reflect the growing distance between academic systematics and the faithful practices of worshipping institutions and communities. The situation has prompted varied reflections in contemporary discussion, and thus have produced numerous avenues for potential dogmatic advancement. Plantinga, for example, argues for a model of systematics that advocates the centrality of a mode of thought derived from the work of Aquinas and Calvin which demonstrates the reality of warranted belief in God with the aim of producing faith.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, Hauerwas proposes that the practice of theology is an exercise in “practical reason” with the aim of producing true wisdom and right action in keeping with the reality of the Christian gospel.<sup>9</sup> Further, Gunton, while acknowledging that the nature of theological enquiry necessitates a certain degree

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<sup>8</sup> See particularly Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2015), 45-69.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 11-31.

of existential tension in any worldly setting, argues from the history of the contribution of Christian thought to academic enquiry that the ongoing presence of theological study within the academy can act as a powerful witness to divine truth.<sup>10</sup> Zizioulas, in contrast, holds that the primary concern of theology is the preservation of the faithful worship life of the church rather than the engagement of the world outside.<sup>11</sup> Such varied dogmatic prolegomena that have abounded with the contemporary recovery of interest in the practice of systematics are extensive and are thus beyond the scope of the current study. Yet it will be necessary to consider how Webster's approach to the contested area of dogmatic foundations and telos might be expected to shape his formulation of a theology of divine holiness.

The reality that Webster was unable to complete his complete systematics necessitates any attempt to reconstruct his dogmatic foundations must be acknowledged as including an amount of speculation. As with any systematician, his methodology underwent adjustment as he engaged further with Scripture and the witness of the church. As Sanders observes regarding Webster's later work:

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<sup>10</sup> Colin E. Gunton, "Doing Theology in the University Today", in *The Practice of Theology: a Reader* (eds. Colin E. Gunton, Stephen R. Holmes, and Murray A. Rae; London: SCM Press, 2001), 441-456.

<sup>11</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics* (ed. Douglas H. Knight; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 6-7.

Those who felt professionally implicated in Webster's theological progress now gather around his literary remains looking for signs to confirm our suspicions: here a turn of phrase suggests the trailhead of a new departure; there an unexpected footnote indicates the sources he was reading and finding persuasive; or else a pattern of Scripture citation suggests which canonical voices were drawing his attention.<sup>12</sup>

When Webster was asked in a 2008 interview what he would have focused on if he had been given the opportunity to restart his study of theology afresh he replied:

...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.<sup>13</sup>

An examination of Webster's published work on the nature and aims of systematics confirms a primary concern for the priority of theological reflection as an activity of redeemed thinking on divine revelation in Scripture experienced in the context of the Church over the Academy. Such priorities ultimately enable him to ground his theological exegesis of Scripture as primarily confessional in nature, thus

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<sup>12</sup> Fred Sanders, "Holy Scripture under the Auspices of the Holy Trinity: On John Webster's Trinitarian Doctrine of Scripture", *IJST* 21/1 (2019): 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jason Byassee, & Mike Allen, "Being Constructive: An Interview with John Webster", *CC* 125/11(2008): 34.

facilitating engagement and dialogue with a wide range of historical and modern voices to sharpen interpretation and application. The present section will seek to outline Webster's theological method and key principles, including his view and use of Scripture, so that it may subsequently be determined whether his formula for divine holiness accords with the standards which he himself has set.

### **a. Theological Foundations**

As Webster's published work addressed a plethora of systematic and ethical topics a comprehensive analysis of his theological method is beyond the scope of the current study. However, prior to examine his particular views on divine holiness it will be necessary to examine key elements of his theological method which directed his approach to the doctrine of God.

In his inaugural lecture as Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford University in 1997<sup>14</sup>, Webster identified two main factors which had resulted in the isolation of theological thought in the contemporary university. Firstly, the aims and methods of the modern university had departed from its Christian heritage and had increasingly marginalised and discouraged theological research as a core part of its identity. Secondly, the nature of academic theology had grown to have an

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<sup>14</sup> Published as "Theological Theology" in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 11-31.

almost entirely internal frame of reference and had thus become alienated from the culture and worship life of the Church. The consequence had been that, while the foundations of theological enquiry may require a process of reconfiguration, neither the academy nor the Church is empowered to take an interest in the task.<sup>15</sup> Webster notes that the nature of modern academic enquiry tends to favour modes of investigation that intuitively preference certain outcomes that are in keeping with those that the system has deemed acceptable. Such an ‘anthropology of enquiry’ stems from liberal assumptions regarding “the ideal of freedom from determination by situation” and the necessity of putting aside personal convictions prior to commencing true intellectual examination of the subject.<sup>16</sup> Suffice it to say, Webster finds such conditions problematic for the flourishing in particular of theological enquiry.

Webster subsequently identified specific concessions to the academic mindset within the theological disciplines which had hastened the decline of relevance. He notes his agreement with the views of Michael Buckley and Eberhardt Jüngel that the trajectory of modern systematics had been away from an explicitly Trinitarian foundation of the divine being and towards a more generic theism that could be

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 14.

interpreted as more inclusive of other religious traditions.<sup>17</sup> Under such methodological constraints Christian theology had necessarily lost its most essentially “Christian” facet and was subsequently impacted in a number of key doctrines. Webster highlights the rise of contemporary views on divine revelation, which begin not with the being of God as the foundation of both content and human comprehension but instead with epistemology as necessary prolegomena to doctrinal enquiry.<sup>18</sup> The result has been that the being of God has become subject to contemporary formulations of acceptable revelation rather than knowledge proceeding from the divine essence as had been assumed previously. Webster also sees significance in the shifting theological place of the resurrection event from an object of belief to a foundation of belief, with the result that the actions of God now must support credal statements regarding the being of God.<sup>19</sup> Webster’s primary critique of much in contemporary systematics, therefore, centres on the reversal of the role of God in the theological process. God is no longer the eternal subject as I AM WHO I AM but the object of evaluation by processes and standards external to his story of self-revelation. Webster, in contrast, favours a return to a more explicitly God-centred systematic approach, and his subsequent contributions increasingly displayed the scholastic influence of Aquinas in his

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 18. c.f. M. J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 67; Eberhardt Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 19-20. c.f. F. Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 14.

methodology in order to achieve this end.<sup>20</sup> In this Webster indicates his methodological sympathy not just with the Reformed tradition but with the original spirit of the Protestant movements of prior centuries.

The contemporary transformation of the nature of theological enquiry has altered, in Webster's view, the appropriate use of text and canon. He reflects that the purpose of Calvin's *Institutes* or biblical commentaries was to a distinct degree narrow – to expound the Word of God so that it may shape faith and practice. Such concern is largely absent in modern dogmatics which treat Scripture as an object of enquiry rather than citation and thus is directed more towards the circumstances of how the text came into existence or reflects the priorities more natural to the sociological or literary academies. The result is that while many contemporary studies may be concerned with Scripture as a field of broadly humanist enquiry there is only a limited sense in which such studies are truly theological in nature.<sup>21</sup> Webster's attention to the concessions in the contemporary approach to Scripture within academic theology foreshadows how his own approach to sacred text will endeavour to correct this trajectory.

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<sup>20</sup> Dekker offers a critique that Webster's increasing reliance on a scholastic method in his search for a theological theology tended to push his work towards abstraction and that he failed to appropriately consider the metaphysical critiques of those such as Jüngel. This interpretation seems to rely on a rather narrow view of Webster's systematic and it may be that Webster's theological connection between the Trinity and economy (to be discussed here shortly) found across his work more broadly would have answered some of these critiques. See Willem Maarten Dekker, "John Webster's Retrieval of Classical Theology", *JRT* 12 (2018): 59-63.

<sup>21</sup> Webster, "Theological Theology", 20-22.

Webster's examination of contemporary shifts in the approach to theology within the academy acts as prolegomena for his own vision of theological enquiry. The central challenge of theology for Webster is not concerned with eternal innovation hoping to prolong retaining a seat at the intellectual table, but instead to recapture the task of theology as a uniquely 'theological' discipline able to challenge the established processes and assumptions of the academy as a whole. He contends:

The distinctiveness of Christian theology lies...not simply in its persistence in raising questions of ultimacy, but rather in its invocation of God as agent in the intellectual practice of theology. In order to give account of its own operations, that is, Christian theology will talk of God and God's actions.<sup>22</sup>

Webster approves the accepted position of classical Reformed theology expounded by those such as Wollebius, which held the primary principle of theology to be talk of God himself with Scripture as the noetic principle.<sup>23</sup> For Webster, any theology that does not proceed from the conviction that God is inherently present through Word and Spirit ultimately fails in its primary principle. Such convictions derive

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25. A similar point is made by T. F. Torrance: "As a science theology is obliged to submit only to the demand of its own subject-matter, and to accept only the forms, possibilities and conditions of knowledge dictated by the nature of what it seeks to know. It is thus that theology develops its own *inner dogmatics*, and this in the interest of scientific fidelity and purity. Christian dogmatics is the pure science of theology in which, as in every pure science, we seek to discover the fundamental structure and order in the nature of things and to develop basic forms of thought about them as our understanding is allowed to be controlled by them from beyond our individualism." In *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 338.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 25-26

warrant from Jesus' charge to his apostles for the creation of new disciples through the teaching of his words and the assurance of his enduring presence to the eschaton (Matt 28:19-20).

Such convictions lead Webster into positive engagement with historic voices who share such convictions, regardless of whether those voices share his dogmatic or devotional convictions. Sonderegger notes:

Webster's past was the living voice of a living faith. But the past, for Webster, was not simply a foreign country; nor even less, a retreat and refuge. Rather, the theological riches of theology's past served the present. Webster is a modern theologian in just this sense: that the whole of the Christian tradition bears down upon the work we are given to do in this season and day.<sup>24</sup>

In terms of modern voices, Webster has noted his approval of the systematic approach of Karl Barth, in whose work Webster discerns a deep engagement with both his contemporaries and the historic church in what he saw a participation in an ongoing conversation of reflection and description of the character and work of God.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Katherine Sonderegger, "The God-Intoxicated Theology of a Modern Theologian", *IJST* 21/1 (2019): 26.

<sup>25</sup> John Webster, "'There is no past in the Church, so there is no past in theology': Barth on the History of Modern Protestant Theology", in *Conversing with Barth* (BS; eds. John C. McDowell & Mike Highton; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 22.

The result of theology returning to its uniquely ‘theological’ roots in Webster’s view would be that theology as a discipline would function as both a check and a rebuke to established modes of enquiry in the academy more broadly and thus recapturing its primary intellectual contribution.<sup>26</sup> True theology does not resemble other academic pursuits as it necessarily eschews objectivity in preference to faith and worship.<sup>27</sup> Yet such personal commitment does not necessarily undercut true enquiry as it does focus attention in a shared direction.

Orthodoxy is participation in a tradition which directs itself to a source of convertedness. It involves a setting of the self – including the knowing self – within patterns of common action and contemplation, of speech and hearing. When they function well, those patterns are sufficiently stable to provide focus, and yet sufficiently aware of their own provisionality to enable self-critical adaptability and to offer a check against stasis. ‘Orthodoxy’ of this kind enables the theologian to articulate a distinctively theological account of the

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<sup>26</sup> Webster, “Theological Theology”, 27-28.

<sup>27</sup> While similarities in perspective may be discerned in those of the Radical Orthodox movement there a number of differences with the position Webster advanced. John Milbank, for example, proposed that “we need to reenvision Christianity in order to render it yet more orthodox.” Such an approach centred on a renewed ecclesiology that would be both Catholic and Reformed, a believe in divine participation in eucharistic celebrations, and a special reverence for historical theology as communicating spiritual wisdom. Webster, in contrast, did not advocate for such a reenvisioning of the central Christian faith and instead derived his pattern of systematics on a theological interpretation of Scripture “when it is not burdened by large-scale hermeneutical theory or an inflated ecclesiology”. See John Milbank, “Alternative Protestantism: Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition”, in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation* (eds. James K. A. Smith & James H. Olthuis; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 38; Byassee & Allen: 34.

content, methods and goals of the discipline, and offers much by way of resistance to too ready an acquiescence in the protocols of neighbouring intellectual fields.<sup>28</sup>

It may be thus discerned that in Webster's view the value of theology lies in the singular nature of the enquiry as an active expression of conviction in order to function as a restraint on purely humanist epistemologies in the academy and beyond. It would be expected that his own theological method would conform to this approach.

### **b. The Place of Scripture in Christian Theology**

The nature and use of the Bible for the practice of systematics were the subject of considerable attention in Webster's doctrinal works. He addressed the topic in one dedicated monograph as well as several published articles and book chapters as it continued to receive refinement in accord with developments in his broader dogmatic paradims. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Webster's position regarding the place of Scripture in Christian theology remained fundamentally consistent, though some of his final contributions to the topic suggest that reflections on the historical interpretation within the Church may have featured more prominently in a later fuller systematics than in the period during which his

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<sup>28</sup> Webster, "Theological Theology", 29.

work on divine holiness was composed. While such considerations will factor into an analysis of Webster's view of holiness, his general approach to Scripture will necessarily remain paramount when the central monograph is presented as a product of exegetical theology.

Of primary importance to Webster was the conviction that Scripture functions as a testimony to the reality of the risen Christ, in whom the Church depends as the key to true theology:

Theological hermeneutics inquires into the being of God and creatures in their communicative encounter through the service of Holy Scripture, and assesses interpretative acts for conformity to that being... Unless it addressed itself to these questions with some resolve, theology is unlikely to be able to produce a sharply profiled description of its intellectual responsibilities in the matter of Scripture; and, further, it will remain puzzled by or sceptical about the accounts of that responsibility common among classical Christian thinkers. In the absence of a theological description of the matter, theology will be likely to seek out a substitute in one or other theories of history or textuality or interpretation which coordinate ill with the Christian confession of the Risen one.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John Webster, "Resurrection and Scripture", in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 37.

In a recent reflection on the relation of Webster's view of Scripture to his wider systematics, Sanders provides this observation:

Webster was evidently building a broad and deep foundation of a systematic theological structure that could distinguish and relate what classical Reformed theology called the ontological principle of theology (God) and the cognitive principle of theology (Scripture). Precisely because his goal was to provide an adequate basis for a comprehensive systematic theology, Webster developed a trinitarian account of Scripture that was especially serviceable for extensive systematic construction.<sup>30</sup>

Allen further notes Webster's view that theology presents Scripture as containing the voice of the Living God and which acts primarily as a challenge to any independent individual or corporate certainty.<sup>31</sup> It is how Webster saw the authority of Scripture in authority over the reflections of the Church in the task of theology that will be of primary concern for the current analysis.

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<sup>30</sup> Fred Sanders, "Holy Scripture": 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Allen, "Toward Theological Theology: Tracing the Methodological Principles of John Webster", *Themelios* 41/2 (2016): 220-221.

Presenting a comprehensive analysis of Webster's doctrine of Scripture expounded in these works would go beyond the scope of the current project. However, it will be necessary to outline the points in Webster's work that are pertinent to understanding his use of Scripture in his theological method. Webster's convictions regarding the theological authority and use of the Bible must necessarily be considered within the context of debate regarding the Reformed doctrine of Scripture. Setting the trajectory for much of the subsequent discussion, Calvin held that Scripture was the written and direct Word of God that instructs the faithful in the truth of God's being and works and is sufficient in its precepts to equip a faith that unambiguously directs the reader towards the one true God and away from false gods.<sup>32</sup> Similarly high views of Scripture were adopted by subsequent generations of Reformed systematians. Warfield, for example, went so far as to equate the voice of Scripture with the voice of God himself.<sup>33</sup> While such a perspective would ground theological method in a high degree of authority to a divine text, two obvious weaknesses may be noted. First, the nature of Scripture is reduced to a virtually verbal inspiration as the voice of the human authors are subsumed by the divine voice, which would be difficult to sustain in light of the varied voices and perceptions present across the text. Second, if the words of Scripture were simply synonymous with the words of God then the

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<sup>32</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (LCC; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), I.vi.1-2, 1.69-73.

<sup>33</sup> B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948), 145-146.

appropriate theological approach to the text would essentially be passive and receptive. In an attempt to resolve the struggle for supremacy between Church and Scripture, Barth proposed that standing in authority over both was the revealed Word in the incarnate Christ and his message of redemption which is proclaimed by witnesses in the content of Scripture.<sup>34</sup> The words of Scripture are essentially human words which contain God's revelatory and salvific work in the incarnate Word. Thus:

Recollection of God's past revelation, discovery of the Canon, faith in the promise of the prophetic and apostolic word, or better, the self-imposing of the Bible in virtue of its content, and therefore the existence of real apostolic succession is also an event, and is to be understood only as an event. In this event the Bible is God's Word. That is to say, in this event *the human prophetic and apostolic word is a representative of God's Word* in the same way as the word of the modern preacher is to be in the event of real proclamation: a human word which has God's commission to us behind it, a human word to which God has given Himself as object, a human word which is recognised and accepted by God as good, a human word in which God's own address to us is an event... *The Bible is God's Word to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it.*<sup>35</sup> (emphasis mine)

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<sup>34</sup> Karl Barth, *CD I/1* (eds. G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 107-108.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

In Barth's view Scripture is not the authoritative voice of God in and of itself, but instead human testimony of the divine plan of salvation in the incarnate Word that has been ordained to the rank of authorised testimony.<sup>36</sup> Scripture thus contains the Word which God desires the world to hear and by which God in Christ desires to be truly known. While such a position safeguards the human origin of the text against an oversimplified theory of divine dictation, it leaves open the question as to what extent such texts speak meaningfully of divine or eternal realities if they are ultimately grounded in the temporal perspective of human witnesses? It is therefore evident that the dual legacies of the Reformed and Barthian understandings of the nature of Scripture have primarily shaped the foundations of Webster's theological use of the Bible.

Webster's doctrinal position on the Bible evolved somewhat over the course of his work. In his dedicated monograph on the subject he supplies the following definition:

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<sup>36</sup> Recently a similar position has been advanced by Miroslav Volf, who states that the Bible is "a site of God's self-revelation" (*Captive to the Word of God* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], 19-20). Volf's view is that Scripture is composed of the testimony of human witnesses that has been appropriated by God as a reliable witness to the realities of the Gospel. Scripture, therefore, is a "site" or location of revelation rather than revelation in and of itself.

‘Holy Scripture’ is a shorthand term for the nature and function of the biblical writings in a set of communicative acts which stretch from God’s merciful self-manifestation to the obedient hearing of the community of faith.<sup>37</sup>

Such a designation implies Scripture acting as a bridge between the historical divine revelation in act and the community of faith which such acts produce. In them the truth of God’s being is communicated in the context of an “obedient hearing”, thus implying a unique operation within the community of faith as opposed to the world generally. To avoid the debate over whether the biblical text is essentially natural or supernatural in character, Webster proposes that the written human witness becomes ‘sanctified’ by the operation of the Holy Spirit and thus takes on a more direct role in revelation.

For the notion of Scripture as ‘sanctified’ addresses the cluster of problems we have been reviewing by offering a dogmatic ontology of the biblical texts which elides neither their creatureliness nor their relation to the free self-communication of God. At its most basic, the notion states that the biblical texts are creaturely realities set apart by the Triune God to serve his self-presence.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> John Webster, *Holy Scripture: a Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Webster affirms the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, though he is careful to demonstrate that his interpretation of this characteristic differs somewhat from his Reformed forebears in particular.

Properly understood, ‘verbal’ inspiration does not extract words from their field of production or reception, does not make the text a less than historical entity, or make the text itself a divine agent. Nor does it entail neglect of the revelatory presence of God in favour of an account of originary inspiration. It simply indicates the inclusion of texts in the sanctifying work of the Spirit so that they may become fitting vessels for the treasure of the Gospel.<sup>39</sup>

The inspiration of the written Word, therefore, is for Webster merely one function of the sanctifying works of the Spirit in the context of the Church. Webster’s argument demonstrates that he is prepared to defend a *sola scriptura* authority while acknowledging the very human origins of the text, thus offering in essence a refinement on the Barthian position.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>40</sup> Sanders comments that Webster’s later systematic work on Scripture, particularly centred on the question of inspiration, reveals a drift away from Barthian concerns and back towards a more orthodox Reformed perspective (see “Holy Scripture”: 19-21). D’Costa, writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, questions whether Webster’s dogmatic position is inherently self-defeating and inevitably results not in authority resting entirely in Scripture but in an individualistic magisterium of theological forebears that agree with Webster’s own perspectives (see “Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Some Comments on John Webster’s Conception of ‘Holy Scripture’”, *IJST* 6/4 (2004): 342). However, while such a danger may exist, D’Costa fails to demonstrate that Webster is in fact guilty of this error through being insufficiently critical of exegetical or systematic errors made by those in his own tradition. As is clear from Webster’s work broadly, those from whom he draws theological inspiration are not as narrow as D’Costa suggests, nor does Webster merely affirm their authority through simple concurrence without Scriptural foundation.

It appears evident that, following Barth, Webster does not wish to separate Scripture from Christology.

Holy Scripture and its interpretation are elements in the domain of the Word of God. That domain is constituted by the communicative present of the risen and ascended Son of God who governs all things.<sup>41</sup>

For Webster the rule of Christ does not rest on the authority of the text or the theological traditions that accompany its interpretation, but instead Scripture is under the authority of Christ who is Lord. Yet while Webster evidently accepts the temporal and historical nature of the biblical texts, he still believes that Scripture is the means by which divine instruction is to be received. He contends:

In the domain of Christ's rule and revelation, Holy Scripture is the embassy of the prophets and apostles. Through their service, and quickened to intelligent and obedient learning by the Holy Spirit, the communion of saints is instructed by the living Christ.<sup>42</sup>

Scripture, therefore, is not merely witness testimony approved of by God, but instead the means by which Christ directly makes his rule known to the world. The revelation of Christ's message is the work of the Spirit through the ambassadors

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<sup>41</sup> John Webster, "The Domain of the Word", in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

which Christ has selected to bring the message to those whom God is gathering by his Spirit. In Scripture the Church is not merely instructed about Christ, but instead *by Christ* in the words of the approved witnesses. Webster therefore accepts Scripture as the Word of God but notes that its position as such relies on the agency of the ultimate living Word in Christ.

Webster's view on the nature of Scripture must be understood with respect to his understanding of divine economic action as primarily communicative and relational. God intended for his works to carry with them a capacity for understanding so that his nature might be known.

As God acts to reconcile and perfect, God addresses creaturely intelligence, summoning creatures to knowledge, trust, love and praise, and not merely making a blank determination concerning them. God, in short, *speaks*.<sup>43</sup>

It may thus be noted that for Webster the appropriate responses to divine self-communication are not merely cognitive but emotional and devotional. Relational outcomes are not merely accidental to the divine economy but are instead its driving purpose. In order to fulfil such ends, Scripture is ordained as the means of communicating the reality of the economy.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 8 (emphasis original).

To accomplish his communicative mission, the exalted Son takes into his service a textual tradition, a set of human writings, so ordering their course that by him they are made into living creaturely instruments of his address of living creatures. Extending himself into the structures and practices of human communication in the sending of the Holy Spirit, the divine Word commissions and sanctifies these texts to become fitting vehicles of his self-proclamation. He draws their acts into his own act of self-utterance, so that they become the words of the Word, human words uttered as a repetition of the divine Word, existing in the sphere of the divine Word's authority, effectiveness and promise.<sup>44</sup>

God's desire for relationship, therefore, is accomplished through Christ as the true living Word through the written Scripture as inspired by the Spirit so that the words of prophets and apostles might become what they were always intended to be – the self-communication of the one true God.

Another vital aspect of Webster's theology of Scripture that should receive attention here is his view on the 'clarity' of Scripture as it pertains to the activity of dogmatics. Webster presents clarity as more than simply capacity for comprehension:

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

The clarity of Scripture is the work which God performs in and through this creaturely servant as, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God illumines the communion of the saints and enables them to see, love and live out the gospel's truth. God lifts up the light of his countenance upon the saints through Holy Scripture, orders their interpretation of the biblical testimony and so builds them up in godliness.<sup>45</sup>

Apart from the aspect of divine self-communication in this definition (which has already been sufficiently addressed), two further points should be noted.

First, the efficacy of clarity is communal. Scripture is clear not simply to an individual consciousness but to the redeemed community who are called to a common understanding of the truth being communicated. As Webster states:

...Scripture is an ecclesial reality because the place of Scripture is in the economy of salvation, and the economy of salvation concerns the divine work of restoring fellowship through the gathering of the *sanctorum communio*. A soteriology without an account of the church would be incomplete; and a bibliology uncoordinated to ecclesiology indicates a cramped grasp of the scope of the divine economy.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> John Webster, "On the Clarity of Holy Scripture", in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005), 33.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

In his later works Webster further proposed that the clarity of Scripture “emerges over time in the common life and practices of the Christian community, as the Spirit illuminates, reprove idolatry and enables attention and obedience to the Word.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, clarity is not determined in examination of the text in isolation from the historical and contemporary interpretation of the Church but necessarily alongside it. While Webster’s systematics would retain a primacy of exegesis, his later work would more seriously consider the role historical construction of doctrine through exegetical interpretation, particularly with respect to the impact of the Scholastics on later Reformed thought.

Second, the clarity of Scripture invites interpretation and application by the community which God summons by it. The sanctified words by which the Word is made known are not merely external realities for the Church but instead must be internalised if they are to serve their intended purpose. So:

Interpretation is necessary because Holy Scripture is an element in the economy of salvation, the economy whose theme is the renewal of fellowship between God and his human creatures. Interpretation is an aspect of the rebirth of our noetic fellowship with God.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Webster, “Domain”, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Webster, “Clarity”, 59.

In summary, Webster believes that the clarity of Scripture does not derive solely from the self-revelation of God by it but also because by the Spirit a redeemed community is drawn together for the purpose of common understanding and application of the divine message together. This will be important as we turn to consider Webster's views on the nature of the theological task itself.

### **c. Theology as Redeemed Thinking in the Presence of God**

The prior section established the framework by which Webster views the exercise of theology as distinct from other intellectual endeavors and his conviction that Scripture acts as sanctified and authoritative testimony through which God directly speaks to gather the church to hear, reflect, and act. The next step is to consider how such foundations direct and shape Webster's 'theological theology' more specifically. The nature of the central purpose of systematics has been the subject of contention among practitioners, from the more cognitive aims of the production and interpretation of dogma<sup>49</sup> to theo-dramatic direction for a Christian life of performance of the drama of redemption.<sup>50</sup> As will be demonstrated, Webster's vision of theology as redeemed thinking in the presence of God appears to derive from his outlined foundations as a distinctly localised exercise of the

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<sup>49</sup> Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* (trans. Darrell L. Guder; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1981), 1:38-43.

<sup>50</sup> Kevin J. Vanhooser, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 100-112.

church through voices and perspectives both historical and modern directed to the end of enabling both intellectual and practical applications.

In considering the exercise of systematics in the modern era, Webster is critical of approaches to theology which prioritise a mode of public engagement, as in his view, such methods tend to concern themselves primarily with history and practical action. Webster locates a stronger foundation in the approach of Aquinas, arguing that the proper sphere of systematics must be centered on divine revelation and action.<sup>51</sup> In opposition to the methodology of modern liberal academics, which Webster had identified as overwhelmingly self-referential and requiring of the investigator to summon the subject to themselves, true systematic theology is founded on the subject of God and of his works, specifically those of revelation and salvation, and thus can only be approached as a scientific endeavour after first understanding those acts of revelation and salvation in not only a cognitive but also a transformative manner. He maintains that:

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<sup>51</sup> John Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology", in *The Domain of the Word* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 134-135. This is not to imply that Webster is solely concerned with matters pertaining to the economy. East observes that Webster remains consistently critical of any dogmatic method that fails to adequately consider the reality of the inner life of God and thus effectively collapses the immanent into the economic. See Brad East, "John Webster, Theologian Proper", *ATR* 99/2 (2017): 336.

...theology is not primarily scholarship or study (though it is that also), but reason following God's perfect knowledge of himself and of all things.<sup>52</sup>

The divine self-knowledge, while at its heart unintelligible by humanity given the eternal mystery of the perichoretic union of the triune God who acts, is nevertheless extended by divine grace to provide the possibility of communion in this knowledge. The object of true theology is God the Holy Trinity, who is self-existent and precedes all things he has made, and thus centres on the persons of the Trinity as well their essence and properties.<sup>53</sup>

As his later and more developed formulations came to reflect more of the pre-modern influence of those such as Aquinas, Christian theology for Webster therefore functioned as an exercise of reason made possible by the self-communication of God in himself and in his Word.<sup>54</sup> Of themselves, human creatures are inadequately equipped to engage in the exercise of theology, and thus God condescendingly accommodates his revelation to them in the intelligible form of Scripture and qualifies them through the presence of the persons of Son and Spirit.<sup>55</sup> Webster thus regards the task of theology as one that commences with the revelation and grace of God and not merely acts as a response to it. Yet the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>53</sup> John, Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?", in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology Volume I – God and the Works of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016): 213.

<sup>54</sup> Webster, "Principles", 137.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 138-139.

appropriate mode response to this revelation for Webster is not merely cognition but faith. Approving the notion of Augustine that the chief end of theology is the enjoyment of God, he concludes that:

...theological study originates in the gift of God, is deployed in the movement of the redeemed through time and terminates in the apprehension of God.

The corollary of this is that the acquisition of theological knowledge demands spiritual as well as intellectual preparation. Perverse love, hatred of God and creatures, arrogance and despair, evasion of the truth, must be set aside, love and fear of God, docility and ardent desire for God must be put on; and all this through the indwelling of Christ and the quickening of the Spirit. It is *faith* which seeks understanding.<sup>56</sup>

Webster's approach, therefore, reflects a movement away from abstract philosophy as a primary mode of systematics and back towards a more identifiably classical framework with a primary locus in the community of faith over the academy.

A redemptive work of Christ prompts faith so then the mind is redeemed for knowing God afresh as he wishes to be known.

Theological reason thus shares in the baptismal pattern of all aspects of Christian existence. Caught up by the Holy Spirit into the reconciling work of

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 142 (emphasis original).

God in Christ, reason is condemned and redeemed, torn away from its evil attachments to falsehood, vanity and dissipation, and so cleansed and sanctified for service in the knowledge of the truth of the gospel.<sup>57</sup>

Theology therefore acts primarily as an exercise of redeemed thinking. Rather than an objective analysis of data, the Christian mind becomes subject to the grace of God and so directed towards redeemed ends.

Theological reason is reason baptized. Baptism, however, concerns not only mortification but vivification; in it, we receive appointment to life and activity in fellowship with God the reconciler.<sup>58</sup>

Understanding divine truth facilitates more than simply correct service or behaviour - it also necessitates fellowship with the God who redeems. Those who engage in theology participate in redeemed thinking while in the presence of God and in fellowship with him. Westerholm observes that this understanding resulted practically in Webster increasingly adopting a theological form of historicism which led him to engage more frequently with pre-modern theological voices over his career. In this he did not attempt to prioritise the ancient over the modern but rather sought to comprehend the history of salvation in which the redeemed Church stands.<sup>59</sup> For Webster, therefore, the true end of theology cannot be

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<sup>57</sup> John Webster, "Introduction", in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>59</sup> Martin, Westerholm, "On Webster's *God Without Measure* and the Practice of Theological Theology", *IJST* 19/4 (2017): 446-448.

reduced to individual perceptions of the reality of the divine but instead is directed towards the ongoing history of salvation by which the Church is called and thereby participates through an ongoing life of faith. True theology must necessarily consist in understanding what God has accomplished to deliver the Church to this point in history and how the gospel of Christ compels the faithful to continue the journey in faith with the God who saves.

Webster's theological vision therefore involves the application of human reason to the reality of the self-revelation of God and thus creaturely reason as applied to the exercise of theology must be recognised as taking place within the economy of grace rather than transcending it. There is a distinct movement observable in Webster's framework from the doctrine of God to the economy. Thus:

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>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?", 217.

Webster advances four points regarding how the nature of the divine economy must be considered with respect to systematics: it is grounded in the inner nature of the divine Trinity (i.e. aseity is preeminent), it is seen in the context of a history of fellowship as humanity is summoned by God to know and love him, it includes God's work in redemption<sup>61</sup>, and is primarily a work of revelation.<sup>62</sup> Thus:

The divine economy – founded in God's own life, fellowship-creating, redemptive, and revelatory – is fundamental to creaturely being and acts. It is the atmosphere or sustaining context of what creatures are and do. Human communicative activity takes place against this deep metaphysical (ontotheological) background, in the situation brought about by the active presence of the triune God and under the impulse of his summons.<sup>63</sup>

It should be noted that Webster had a tendency to employ the phrase “divine economy” in a dual sense. Firstly it is the common use of the operation of the God who creates and redeems, but secondly it is “the sphere of creaturely reality” which is under his command and control.<sup>64</sup> By this dual use, Webster is attempted to narrow the divide between the actions of God and the location in which they occur. God thus operates in the space which he has already ordained to make

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<sup>61</sup> Webster frames the need for redemption as a problem of “senselessness” that stems from rejecting knowledge and fellowship.

<sup>62</sup> Webster, “Biblical Reasoning”, *ATR* 90/4 (2008): 736-738.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*: 738.

<sup>64</sup> John Webster, “Biblical Reasoning”: 734.

himself known, and thus does not stand outside and apart from his works but finds his most natural place within them.

In practice, Webster's systematics are oriented towards a threefold shape. As he states:

...the primacy of theology proper is best reflected by treating first the being of God *in se*, followed by treatment of the works of God, with the theology of the divine mission as the hinge between the two.<sup>65</sup>

In this way Webster attempts to resolve the tension in much of the modern discussion of God (and indeed, systematics more broadly) between dependence on either the immanent or economic Trinity through a missiological nexus. Webster does not regard a bias towards a particular side as necessary, but that interpretation of divine ontology and action must derive from the relational outcomes achieved by Christ. That mission by God to Creation results in a relational space where humanity can reflect on divine revelation in order to nurture a deeper faith and respond accordingly through lives of witness to the unchanging truth.

God establishes and maintains fellowship with his creatures by addressing them through his Word, thereby summoning them to address themselves to

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<sup>65</sup> Webster, "Principles", 146.

his address. Fellowship with God includes rational fellowship; and of this rational fellowship, Christian theology is an instance.<sup>66</sup>

God has thus oriented himself within a relational framework for the purpose of engaging human understanding through the revealed Word, and consequently humanity should consider the economy as reflective of the depths of the character of God from which these actions draw their source.<sup>67</sup> This relational telos will become important later as he advances a definition of divine holiness as a mode of relation.

Webster's view of the "ends" of theology, by which he signifies the state of completeness when the purposes of the exercise is achieved, is also worth consideration. He proposes three distinct ends to which theology should be directed.<sup>68</sup> First, theology should be directed to scientific ends as the person and works of God become understood and put to rational application. Second, theology should have contemplative ends as the believer is drawn by their knowledge to contemplate the person of God afresh and the possibility of eternal fellowship with him. In this point Webster is in sympathy with Fathers such as Aquinas and Augustine for whom divine contemplation it was a primary facet of the life of worship. Third, theology should be dedicated to practical ends as

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<sup>66</sup> Webster, "Biblical Reasoning", 734.

<sup>67</sup> Webster, "Principles", 65-66.

<sup>68</sup> Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological", 218-221.

through growth in divine knowledge and in contemplation of God the believer is drawn to shape their lives towards truly good outcomes. It may be summarised that Webster intends the ends of theology to be whole-person directed, fulfilling the command of Christ for a life transformed towards love of God in heart, soul, mind, and strength and in love of neighbour (Matt 22:37-40). Knowledge of God and his works becomes realised in growth in relationship with God and others in the context of a transformed life.

Webster's view and use of Scripture thus informs his understanding of the nature of this relational fellowship. In line with other Reformed theologians, Webster contends that Scripture and reason must both be active in the economy of revelation.<sup>69</sup> He proposes that:

The work of Word and Spirit, through which God gives human creatures a share in his knowledge of himself, is mediated through creaturely auxiliaries. Of these, Holy Scripture is the chief; through its ministry of the divine Word in the Spirit's power, God makes himself known and loved.<sup>70</sup>

Webster classifies Scripture as “apostolic testimony” to God's character. The words of the prophets and apostles are not divine of themselves but operate in an

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 736.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 739.

ambassadorial capacity, authorised by God through his agents to testify truly to the divine character. In Scripture, this embassy of God is carried forward to the Church across the generations.<sup>71</sup>

The authority of Scripture is its power to command thought, speech, and action by virtue of the fact that it brings to bear upon its hearers the purpose of the one who presents himself through its service. Scripture's authority is neither arbitrary nor merely statutory; it heralds the commanding presence of the loving creator.<sup>72</sup>

From the command of Scripture, therefore, Webster locates his foundation for contemplation and engaging in the holy reason from which the exercise of systematics must necessarily proceed.

In summary, Webster's approach to systematics which determines his doctrine of God is as an exercise of holy reason conducted in the divine presence of God with relational intentions. God is to be known not as a remote being, but as an immediate and relational presence in Spirit and Word.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 740.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 742.

#### **d. Conclusion**

From the above analysis it is possible to identify several key principles of Webster's theological method. First, the exercise of theology should be concerned principally with divine rather than worldly realities proceeding from the foundation of faith. Such an approach would ensure not only that theological enquiry resulted in theocentric conclusions but that theology itself would recapture its purpose as a corrective to the purely humanist epistemologies that have come to dominate much contemporary enquiry. Second, Webster places ultimate authority for theology in the witness of Scripture. Scripture is to function as an authenticated witness to the incarnate Word produced through the inspiration of the Spirit by human prophets and apostles. Third, as a consequence, the task of theology is classified as redeemed thinking in the presence of God. Because humanity is in receipt of the authenticated witness of "God for us" they are called into a relational posture before the Creator and invited to partake of the divine self-knowledge that has been offered to them. Fourth, the shape of theology takes on a threefold form as it considers God *in se*, God in his works, and God as Creator and Saviour in relationship with the world as the nexus that binds them. Such an understanding of Webster's dogmatic method will be necessary for a reasoned analysis of his systematic understanding of the divine attributes and holiness that will be attempted in subsequent chapters.

## CHAPTER THREE

### JOHN WEBSTER ON THE DOCTRINE AND ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

The previous chapter considered the systematic foundations of John Webster and the aims and preferred shape of systematics which he advanced in his published works. Webster's primary critique of much of modern systematics derives from his concern that much recent debate has been motivated by a desire to defend the place of theology within the academy rather than as an activity that acts as a guide and corrective to it, as well as the tendency to prioritise abstract conceptions of the divine rather than the self-revelation of God to creation. The nature of theology should instead be considered as redeemed thinking in the presence of God, as the Church considers the reality of the self-disclosure of the Triune God in authoritative Scripture. We may expect that Webster's approach to the specific question of divine holiness within the context of his doctrine of God will display his commitment to these dogmatic principles.

Regarding Webster's dogmatic views regarding the doctrine of God, Sonderegger identifies several principle areas of interest:

The Doctrine of God in Webster's view can concern itself freely with classical metaphysical elements: God's simplicity and aseity, His omnipotence and

ubiquity, His transcendence over time and creaturely becoming, his ‘ideal’ relation to the world, His Self-caused Being.<sup>73</sup>

However, as was the case with his systematic method, she further concedes that to a certain extent Webster’s doctrine of God remains speculative and even incomplete:

We do not have lying open before us a complete doctrine of God, one in which the methodological and epistemic burdens of modernity are fully parsed and resolved. Webster gives us clues in his late essays; but only clues.<sup>74</sup>

This chapter will seek to analyse Webster’s construction of a doctrine of God and the attributes in his published works. Webster’s interaction with the history of these doctrines within and beyond the Reformed tradition will be key to understanding the progression of his own dogmatic formulation. Attention will be given to Webster’s focus on divine aseity and inseity and the effects on the understanding of the divine attributes more broadly in order that his particular views on divine holiness may subsequently be considered within this dogmatic context. Webster’s doctrines of God and the attributes will be evaluated in light of his advocated theological standards and priorities outlined in Chapter Two of this project.

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<sup>73</sup> Sonderegger, “God-Intoxicated Theology”: 30.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

### **a. God and the Attributes in Historical Context**

As a scholar who places theology as an activity of redeemed meditation on revelation conducted within in the church, Webster's *modus operandi* prizes theological dialogue with both ancient and contemporary voices of faith. Concepts which Webster will draw on in his own dogmatic, such as aseity, are done so in the context of much broader discussion regarding the nature of God. It will therefore be initially necessary to provide a brief historical outline the central theological concepts with which Webster principally engages in order that his eventual contribution to the discussion may be fairly evaluated.

While a comprehensive analysis of the history of the doctrine of God (and particularly the patristic debates regarding Trinitarian nature which impacted all subsequent dogmatics) would be beyond the scope of the present study, the current section will outline how the essential nature and attributes of God were considered and confessed within classical Reformed orthodox theology as well as how these concepts were revisited in light of the influence of Karl Barth in the systematic contributions produced by Webster's contemporaries. The following summary is not intended to be comprehensive of the range of the debate in the Reformed orthodox context prior to Webster but will endeavour to highlight particular

themes within the dogmatic history that will be highly relevant to a fair evaluation of Webster's contribution.

### **i. Reformed Systematics – 1525 to 1800**

Reformed theology has from its conception been oriented positively to the possibility of knowledge of God. Calvin's opening of his *Institutes* with the premise that true wisdom is either Knowledge of God or of Self indicated that he was favourably disposed to the task.<sup>75</sup> However, the theological boundaries in which Calvin and his successors operated included limits to such knowledge as necessarily conforming to the content of revelation and the finitude and corrupted sinfulness of human comprehension.<sup>76</sup> While Calvin was positive about the truth of natural revelation he was careful not to rely on a "natural theology" owing to the tendency of humanity to corrupt the truth of such revelation into idolatry, and treated such knowledge as "persuasions" rather than "proofs".<sup>77</sup> Thus the language of this period regarding God and the Attributes, while attempting to elucidate the full range of Scripture as a true witness to divine reality, tended towards the

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<sup>75</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (LCC XX; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.i.1-2.

<sup>76</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iv.1-4.

<sup>77</sup> K. Scott Oliphint, "A Primal and Simple Knowledge (1.1-5)", in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis* (eds. David W. Hall & Peter A. Lillback; Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 36-40.

apophatic.<sup>78</sup> Reformed orthodoxy over the subsequent centuries would struggle to fulfil its calling in elucidating a positive vision of God and his character in faithfulness to Scripture rather than remaining captive to negative definitions.

Reformed theology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not unthinkingly assume the philosophical or doctrinal framework of Scholastic forebears with respect to the doctrine of God. Therefore, there was within the tradition no standard position on either the number or type of attributes or the nature of divine simplicity.<sup>79</sup> Various statements of faith and creeds produced by the emerging Protestant churches were primarily concerned with the form of true salvific faith, and thus the nature and character of God as the object of that faith is generally dealt with only briefly, if at all. The first Reformed confessions<sup>80</sup> (e.g. Tetrapolitan, First Helvetic) reflected their Lutheran origins and approached the doctrine of God by affirming the creedal formula of One-Essence-Three-Persons. The 39 Articles of the Church of England, though a more Reformed collection in character, similarly follows this established pattern in the language in Article I. By the time of the Second Helvetic Confession the preservation of divine unity in essence and

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<sup>78</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: the Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725. Volume Three: The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 165–166.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33.

<sup>80</sup> The forms of the confessions and other statements of faith referred to in this section follow those recorded in *Creeds & Confession of Faith in the Christian Tradition Volume II – Part Four: Creeds and Confession of the Reformation Era* (eds. Jaroslav Pelikan & Valerie Hotchkiss; New Haven: Yale University press, 2003).

nature became pressing, thus “the same immense, one and indivisible God is in person inseparably and without confusion distinguished as Father, Son and Holy Spirit” and “distinct with respect to hypostases, and with respect to order, the one preceding the other yet without any inequality”.<sup>81</sup> The Westminster Confession generally echoes these concerns, but two shifts in language are worth noting. First, the Westminster Confession includes among the list of attributes that God is to be considered “incomprehensible”.<sup>82</sup> Second, the Confession has a stronger emphasis on God’s self-sufficiency and certain qualities directly attributed to his person, thus:

God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, not deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory, in, by, unto, and upon them.<sup>83</sup>

A pattern may therefore be discerned in early Reformed theology as doctrinal points were considered in isolation (e.g. doctrine of God treated as distinct from

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<sup>81</sup> Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter III.

<sup>82</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, II.1. Vos proposes that in the context of the Larger Catechism the Westminster divines employed the term in light of 1 Kings 8:27 to denote that God could not be contained or “comprehended” in the physical dimensions of creation, though he is the one who fills all things with his being. However, Sproul interprets this language as referring specifically to human inability to adequately comprehend the transcendent God as being consistent with Calvin’s earlier work. This perspective appears to be most consistent and would come to be influential in Reformed dogmatics. It should be noted that Vos and Williamson both affirm the limitations of human knowledge of God but include this as logical corollaries of divine infinity and omniscience respectively rather than being explicit statements of Westminster belief. See Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: a Commentary* (ed. G. I. Williamson; Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 20-21; R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: a Layman’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – Volume One: The Triune God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2006), 41-42; G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), 32.

<sup>83</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, II.2

Justification or Sanctification) without the strict imposition of an overarching metaphysical or theological narrative. The general assumption of early Reformed confessions was that the nature and attributes of God were a matter of exegesis rather than philosophy or natural theology.<sup>84</sup>

Formulations of the attributes in early Reformed theology drew heavily on Scholastic paradigms, assuming an analogical relationship between the created order and the Creator, though the Reformers tended more towards exegetical rather than rational analysis. William Ames, for example, employed a propositional method in working through relevant texts of Scripture to outline his understanding of divine essence and attributes in a series of short theses. Ames held to an essentially analogical understanding of the attributes, but also stated that the divine attributes were divine perfections, as what may be observed by humanity finds its fulfilment in the character of God himself.<sup>85</sup> As will be demonstrated, the language of “perfection” will be reappropriated and used in a distinct sense in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

Reformed orthodox dogmatics prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not have an agreed definition of holiness, variously employing the term to refer to either a moral or personal separation of God from this world, a pureness of spirit, or righteousness

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<sup>84</sup> Muller, 92–93.

<sup>85</sup> William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (trans. John Kykstra Eusden; Durham: Labyrinth, 1983), 83–87.

in justice. Nevertheless, holiness was consistently viewed as deriving from the character of God in himself, and thus properly belonging to the immanent Trinity.<sup>86</sup> Charnock provided possibly the most thorough consideration of the topic, outlining a number of divine attributes (including holiness) with reference to the eternal existence of the God revealed in Scripture, and treated holiness as related primarily to the uniqueness of the divine being and his moral and ontological opposition to sin.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Thomas Manton, in his exposition on the Lord's Prayer, proposes that the holy character of God requires that his name be sanctified not only out of reverence for his character but also as a confession that he is the one who is not polluted by sin.<sup>88</sup> Yet even as systematic assessments of the attributes developed there remained a tendency to ascribe them little significance beyond the bounds of fallible human perception. Turretin, for example, described the attributes not only as descriptions which humanity attributes to God and his being, but also as ontological conceptions that remain fundamentally inadequate to describe the transcendent reality of the divine.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School: a Study in Method and Content* (SRT 25; Boston: Brill, 2013), 231.

<sup>87</sup> Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1977), 452-461.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton in 22 Volumes* (Worthington, Maranatha), i.85-89.

<sup>89</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison; trans. George M Giger; 3 vols.; Phillipsburg: P & R, 1992), 1:187-188.

For the purposes of analysing Webster's later contributions, it is appropriate to note that the classical Reformed position outlined above approached questions of God and the attributes from a primarily confessional position derived from a conviction that the nature of God was fundamentally transcendent and uncontainable by human language or concepts. God was more than who he had revealed himself to be, and to declare that God was Holy was a confession of that fact.

## **ii. Pre-Barthian Debates – 1800 to 1900**

The ascendance of Wolffian philosophy by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century saw the exegetical and theological methods of Continental theologians in particular grow far more rationalistic with a growing emphasis on natural theology.<sup>90</sup> By the time of Schleiermacher the Reformed tradition could no longer maintain strict confessionalism in order to engage with emerging philosophical and logical challenges emanated from Kant's proposition of a noumenal divide. From this point on the course of Reformed theology would diverge along liberal and traditionalist lines as each side attempted to create a more positive formulation in keeping with the Reformed theological purpose.

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<sup>90</sup> Muller, 142-145.

In response to perceived weaknesses in prior dogmatics to adequately defend the doctrine of God and the attributes against the challenges of the Enlightenment age<sup>91</sup>, Schleiermacher and others sought theological foundation in the divine self-experience instead of confessionalism or strict exposition. Consequently, formulations of the knowledge of God and his attributes (or indeed, whether such a knowledge was even possible) became subjects of high contention.

Schleiermacher, for example, proposed understanding of the divine character in the “immediate self-consciousness” in order to replace an emphasis on speculative metaphysics with personal piety.<sup>92</sup> He contended that the multiple attributes of classical dogmatics are manifestations of various facets of individual God-consciousness, as truly unique attributes would necessitate a composite divine being.<sup>93</sup> The consequence is that true knowledge of the Divine Being is outside of human possibility:

...in so far as a plurality of attributes is developed out of the idea of the divine causality, this differentiation can correspond to nothing real in God; indeed, that neither in isolation nor taken together do the attributes express the Being of God in itself (for the essence of that which has been active can never be known simply from its activity alone) – yet this at least is certain, that all the

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<sup>91</sup> Gerhard, Ebeling, “Schleiermacher’s Doctrine of the Divine Attributes”, in *Schleiermacher as Contemporary* (JTC 7; ed. Robert W. Funk; New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 127-128.

<sup>92</sup> A summary of Schleiermacher’s dogmatic approach to the doctrine of God and the attributes (particularly his desire to reorient consideration of the Trinity away from classical metaphysics) can be found in Christine Helmer, “Schleiermacher”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology* (ed. David Fergusson; Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), 47-54.

<sup>93</sup> Friedrich, Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 195–196.

divine attributes to be dealt with in Christian Dogmatics must somehow go back to the divine causality, since they are only meant to explain the feeling of absolute dependence.”<sup>94</sup>

Schleiermacher is in agreement with historical orthodoxy in that he views the economy as inadequate to describe the divine nature. However, he proposes that even what may be known arises merely from human contemplation of their dependence on the source of causality.<sup>95</sup>

Subsequent writers in the liberal tradition tended to base their doctrine of God in Schleiermacher’s Platonic concept of ‘godforgetfulness’. Ritschl, for example, held that religion was ultimately determined by subjective value judgments:

To be sure, people say that we must first know the nature of God and Christ ere we can ascertain their worth for us...The truth rather is that we know the nature of God and Christ *only in their worth for us*.<sup>96</sup> (emphasis mine)

Harnack developed this further in making the completeness of this dependence the main determinate of true religion:

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>95</sup> Richards supports the view that Schleiermacher’s method is consistent in that, while a theology of the attributes is based on feelings of absolute dependence there is still a God on which to be dependent. Jay Wesley Richards, “Schleiermacher’s Divine Attributes: Their Coherence and Reference”, *Encounter* 57:2 (1996): 153.

<sup>96</sup> Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; eds. H. R. Mackintosh & A. B. Macaulay; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902), 212.

That a man should find God and possess him as *his* God – should live in the fear of him, trust him, and lead a holy and blessed life in the strength of this feeling – that is the substance and the aim of religion. We can carry our conception of religion no further, nor can we allow any alien element to subsist alongside of it.<sup>97</sup>

(emphasis original)

Schleiermacher proposed no difference between the divine attributes and essence and thus true original attributes could never be known as all labels must ultimately derive from the religious self-conscious.<sup>98</sup> As a result, he divides the “attributes” into three categories: those that relate to religious self-consciousness (omnipresence, omnipotence, etc), consciousness of sin (holiness, justice, etc), and redemption (wisdom and love). In the first two he treats the attributes only as expression of the modifications of the self-consciousness, but the third treats the attributes as something more pertaining to the being of God proper.<sup>99</sup> The attempt to define the attributes as simply different perceptions on the one divine essence is at one level consistent with earlier Reformed thought.<sup>100</sup> Yet at the same time, as Schleiermacher chose to highlight the concept of Love as central to God’s being, it was a sign that his framework was shifting away from classical metaphysical

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<sup>97</sup> Adolph von Harnack, *Adolph von Harnack: Liberal Theology at its Height* (ed. Martin Rumscheidt; Glasgow: Collins, 1988), 69.

<sup>98</sup> Schleiermacher, 198–198.

<sup>99</sup> Richards, 150–151.

<sup>100</sup> A defence of Schleiermacher as standing in the tradition of Reformed thought on this topic is made by Daniel J. Pedersen, “Schleiermacher and Reformed Scholastics on the Divine Attributes”, *IJST* 17/4 (2015), 413-431.

speculation in order to serve the interests of church piety.<sup>101</sup> While this brought God and the attributes more into the direct sphere of human contemplation rather than simple confession (a situation that those such as Webster would undeniably support), the result was a dramatic re-evaluation of the nature of God within the Reformed tradition.

For Schleiermacher to declare that God Is Holy is an affirmation that the human religious conscience is aware of a need for redemption.<sup>102</sup> Awareness of the holiness of God is not only manifest in the individual conscious, but in the social conscious seen in moral or civil laws:

“Thus the holiness of God is the divine causality that legislates in the corporate life of man, and since the law, especially as traced to its inward source, is always for us the absolutely holy, and the whole historical process is ordained by this divine causality, no exception can well be taken to our regarding that causality as a distinctive divine attribute, or to our designating it exclusively by the name ‘holiness’.”<sup>103</sup>

Schleiermacher denies that God’s holiness could reflect divine internal judgments on moral or cultic issues as this would not arise out of the religious self-conscious.

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<sup>101</sup> Ebling, 159-160.

<sup>102</sup> Schleiermacher, 341–343.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 344.

Instead, he regards God's omnipotence and omniscience as being equivalent to his holiness:

“With this, again, agree those other interpretations which ascribe to God's holiness the function of demanding from His creatures what is perfectly good; for that demand is made upon them only in virtue of the law or the moral feeling implanted in them. Some of these interpretations bring into the conception the inward purity of God as the ground of the demand; such of them, however, as confine themselves to that purity, or go back even to God's perfect self-love, while the might be relevant in a speculative or a so-called natural theology, have no place in a systematic statement of Christian doctrine.”<sup>104</sup>

In other words, human holiness involves only the necessity to follow individual moral conscious or the social rules, formal or otherwise, imposed on humanity to compensate for their forgetfulness of God's identity, thus necessitating no connection between holy living and direct comprehension of God's character. It is perspectives such as these that Webster will contend with strongly in his understanding of the holiness of God in the life of the church and individual, which will be the subject of examination in Chapter Five of this project.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 345.

Following the growing influence of Schleiermacher, various Reformed theologians attempted a return to more orthodox principles of divine knowledge. The Dutch Reformed perspective of Bavinck was perhaps most significant in his challenge of both natural theology and liberalism not via a simple return to confessionalism but through conviction in the capability of Reformed orthodoxy to answer the contemporary challenges on its own terms.

Bavinck asserts that dogmatics has its foundation in the person of God, who is fundamentally incomprehensible. While God has revealed himself truly in nature and Scripture, the ultimate truth of that revelation is beyond the conception and comprehension of humanity. What we do know is that God is an exalted being far removed from that which he has created while simultaneously Scripture holds that it is possible for humanity to know God.<sup>105</sup> Bavinck thus represents the traditional stream of theological method that emphasises the priority of the immanent. God is ultimately that which is Different and Strange to the creature. Yet Bavinck does not present this as a weakness but a strength, claiming that the Christian affirmation of God's natural unknowability (and the possibility of knowledge only produced by the effect of grace) makes this theology unique. God cannot reveal himself adequately because in order to do so the subject of the knowledge must also be divine. Any labels or titles that we ascribe to God (Father, Creator, Lord,

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<sup>105</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (SRTL; Edinburgh: Banner Of Truth Trust, 1977), 13–14.

etc.) do not describe his being but his power.<sup>106</sup> Some knowledge of the divine may therefore be possible, but to fully understand God as he truly is in himself would be impossible as God in his inner life could not be subjected to our scrutiny except by imperfect means as God has accommodated himself to creaturely understanding.

As such, Bavinck presents true knowledge of God as being subject to the limits of human comprehension of revelation in Jesus Christ. While knowledge of God can be real comprehension of him is necessarily excluded.<sup>107</sup> Revelation in scripture is placed in the context of testimony, appealing to the conscience rather than just the senses. Bavinck thus acknowledged that philosophy could make correct observations regarding the nature of God but insisted that there must be something more for theology to go to beyond mere natural observation.<sup>108</sup> Bavinck maintains that Scripture does not reveal the being of God apart from his economy, though he appears to claim this to guard against the claim that God could be reasoned towards through philosophical means.<sup>109</sup> But this raises the further question that if all attributes attest to divine being, which among them is most fundamental?

Bavinck argues that Reformed theology followed Augustine and Aquinas in holding

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 64–65. A helpful examination of Bavinck’s positive epistemology with respect to the ongoing work of the incarnate Son is made by Nathaniel Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck and Thomas Reid on Perception and Knowing God”, *HTR* 111/1 (2018): 115-134.

<sup>109</sup> Bavinck, 113–114.

to God's aseity as the primary attribute of being.<sup>110</sup> Among the remaining attributes, Bavinck defined God's holiness as moral perfection and purity, particularly concerned with the divine relationship to created order. For humanity, holiness is an ethical quality showing that someone or something has been separated for the purpose of divine service.<sup>111</sup>

“Holy is whatever is in harmony with those special laws which God has prescribed for it; holiness is perfection, not only in the sense of purity, but according to Israel's peculiar legislation. In the most comprehensive sense, as signifying religious, ethical, ceremonial, inward and outward perfection.”<sup>112</sup>

Bavinck's desire to move holiness beyond the moral or cultic to include all aspects of the life of faith will be mirrored and extended in Webster's later description of holiness as a relational attribute.

A final perspective of the pre-Barthian era worthy of consideration is Heinrich Heppe's *Reformed Dogmatics*, for which Barth would compose the foreword.<sup>113</sup>

Heppe's personal commitment to the liberal thought of Schleiermacher and others stands in contrast with the quotes from prior Reformed theologians and orthodox statements that are frequently included in his work. Nevertheless, as a work it was

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 209–211.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>113</sup> Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. Ernst Bizer; trans. G. T. Thomson; London: Allen & Unwin, 1950).

an admitted influence on Barth's later *Dogmatics* and thus its treatment of the doctrine of God and the attributes warrants examination.<sup>114</sup>

Heppe, taking his cue from Reformed Orthodoxy, affirms that knowledge of God is held to be limited by both divine infinity and creaturely limitation, though humanity is said to retain a capacity for knowledge of God through innate religion and morality.<sup>115</sup> Yet Heppe states that such knowledge is not sufficient for true knowledge and that humanity “must give heed to God’s acts of revelation to which Holy Scripture gives testimony.”<sup>116</sup> Regarding the attributes, Heppe portrays them as manifestations of the divine nature in relation to the world. In each attribute the entire Godhead is shown in relation to a definite object.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, distinctions between attributes derive not from a plurality or division in character but on human limitation in recognising the divine unity that manifests itself in differing ways.<sup>118</sup> Heppe rejects concepts of holiness that are essentially judicial or forensic in nature, instead stressing that holiness is a personal characteristic of God. Thus, “God Himself is rather the essential idea and principle of holiness.”<sup>119</sup> From this

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<sup>114</sup> A more comprehensive discussion on the impact of Heppe’s work on Barth’s later systematics can be found in Carl Trueman, “Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology: Historical Prolegomena”, in *Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology* (PTC; Eds. Neil B. MacDonald & Carl Trueman; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 14-20.

<sup>115</sup> Heppe, 52-53.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 58-59.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 92-93.

holy identity God acts in love and righteousness towards his creation and thus reveals his true nature and will<sup>120</sup>

### **iii. Summary**

The approach to the doctrines of God and the Attributes in the Reformed systematics prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century can thus be summarised as an unresolved quest for clarity and true understanding. Though Calvin had foregrounded the importance of knowledge of God and his character, the Reformed tradition continued to operate from apophatic foundations. Despite the influence of rationalist philosophy and Schleiermacher's shift towards absolute dependence, the character of God was still viewed as fundamentally incomprehensible. The attributes, including holiness, may indicate something of the character of God either in his inner life or in the economy, but they could not adequately describe the reality of the divine being. Holiness continued to be understood in primarily moral terms, indicating a perfection in God's exalted being that Christians were obliged to enact through either obedience to Scripture or adherence to modern social and legal regulations.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 93-97.

## **b. Webster on the Doctrine of God**

Having outlined the important historical foundations relevant to the current topic, Webster's own doctrine of God and the attributes must now be considered within his more immediate context. In employing a theological method that values the voices of the historical Church and with ultimately relational aims, Webster must address the challenge of contemporary systematics which has been shown to be sceptical of the influence of classical metaphysics on historical theology and which places a strong emphasis on the economy as the sphere in which the divine character ought to be known. This led him to construct a theology of God and the attributes principally oriented towards Reformed orthodoxy while incorporating the positive contribution of contemporary analysis. A fair evaluation of Webster's systematic contributions therefore takes place within the context of debates attempting to clarify the positive implications of Barth's theological perspective while highlighting ongoing systematic concerns. These concerns arise for post-Barthians across the range of confessional traditions, even the more conservative ones, as they recognise the necessity of balancing immanent and economic perspectives in future systematic formulations.

In addressing the systematic challenges arising in the contemporary debate regarding the nature of God and the attributes Webster not only attempted to re-establish confidence in a framework of classical metaphysics for approaching the

doctrine of God, but also employs a renewed focus on divine aseity as a guarantee of relational assurance. Aseity further functions as the basis for God's economic action that derives from it which he labels "inseity". As a result, he manages to bring together historical and contemporary perspectives into a schema for the divine attributes within which holiness will come to feature prominently.

### **i. The Divine Nature**

A primary influence on the shape of Webster's systematic of the nature of God was Karl Barth, who commenced his examination of the question of the knowledge of God in *Church Dogmatics II/1* by adopting, in line with Calvin, a positive position as to the knowability of God.<sup>121</sup> While Barth has rightly been acclaimed as a unique and highly influential voice in his contribution to modern systematics it would be unfair to characterise him as a theological revolutionary. Barth's primary

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<sup>121</sup> A subject of debate in recent Barthian scholarship is the extent to which the doctrine of God which Barth advances in *CD II/1* must be recast according to his work on the doctrine of election which he addresses in subsequent volumes. Preeminent in advocating this theory has been Bruce McCormack, who proposes that Barth exhibits a distinct change of perspective following *CD II/1* and his work in subsequent volumes reflects his more mature dogmatic position. George Hunsinger, by contrast, does not find anything in Barth's later volumes that fundamentally contradicts his work in *CD II/1*. As the debate is still somewhat ongoing the present project will not attempt to pass final judgment on the topic. However, as Barth himself at no point disavowed the views put forward in *CD II/1* and since these views were widely accepted and utilised within systematics, including by Webster, the present project will treat the theology of *CD II/1* as an authentic reflection of Barth's theology for the purpose of analysis of our primary topic. See Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology", in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (ed. John Webster; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-110; George Hunsinger, George, "Election and Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth", *MT* 24:2 (2008): 179-198.

endeavour was to challenge both the liberal pietism and biblical fundamentalism which had shaped recent Protestant theology in order to recast the exercise as one of conversation with the church through history as well as biblical exegesis and contemporary culture.<sup>122</sup> Although Barth operated within the Reformed tradition and is primarily engaged with this theological lineage, he was not afraid to deviate if he perceived a similar slide into rationalism that was present in that of contemporary liberalism.<sup>123</sup> With respect to the doctrine of God, Webster notes that Barth's methodology diverges from the accepted foundations of much philosophical theology, which tends to begin with proofs of the existence of the divine before moving onto describing the divine nature. Barth's method instead sought to guard not only the centrality of aseity (which Webster will similarly come to prize) but also the particularity of the true revelation of God in Jesus.<sup>124</sup>

For Barth, the Word which has been given establishes the reality by which God is to be known.<sup>125</sup> If God is to be known through his Word, then it stands that God is knowable, and the only real question is to what extent can this knowledge be taken. If the knowledge of God is faith, then it follows that God has made himself known as object for humanity's knowledge. The existence of the church rests on

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<sup>122</sup> Trueman, "Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology: Historical Prolegomena", 11.

<sup>123</sup> See for example William C. Traub, "Karl Barth and the Westminster Confession of Faith", in *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (ed. Ligon Duncan; 3 vols.; Fearn: Mentor, 2009), 3:221-222.

<sup>124</sup> John Webster, *Barth* (OCT; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: Continuum, 2004), 76.

<sup>125</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1* (eds. G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 4.

the fact that God in the incarnate Jesus is spoken of and heard, and thus known.<sup>126</sup> However, the reality of the Trinity means that God knows himself first of all (primary objectivity) before this knowledge is extended to creation (secondary objectivity). Knowledge of God is contingent on God's first decisive act of grace in standing before humanity in Jesus in order to be known.<sup>127</sup> Barth presents God's Word as covenant-making in that God has determined to turn towards humanity in order to be known. This revelation of God as the Lord consists of the fact that he is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is important to recognise the centrality of the incarnate Jesus in the economy of revelation and redemption with respect to the identity of the immanent Trinity in Barth's theology. Barth uses the term "hiddenness" in place of terms such as "invisibility", "incomprehensibility", and so forth, which he believes appropriates the metaphysical structure of Plotinus or Kant in their consideration of the concept of a supreme being. Similar to Luther, Barth emphasises that any knowledge which humanity may possess regarding God does not originate from the apprehension of the divine from humanity but rather the appropriation of humanity by God so that

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 23–32. Elsewhere Barth states that divine incomprehensibility is essentially personal, as God is personal within himself in a way that surpasses human concepts of personhood. Attempts to reduce this God to human concepts of personality would end up turning him into an idol. See Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God: The Gifford Lecture, 1938* (trans. J. L. M. Haire & Ian Henderson; London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 30-32.

he may be known for who he is.<sup>128</sup> Humanity is otherwise powerless to undertake the task of knowing God or speaking properly of him without the decision of God to make himself known. Indeed, Barth claims that humanity's desire to speak of God under their own terms has historically seen the uniqueness of Trinitarian revelation subsumed into a form of divine unity which may be simple to comprehend but inadequate to deal with the fullness of the picture found in Scripture.<sup>129</sup> As an alternate starting point, Barth describes the knowledge of God as perfect and self-sufficient within his own being, requiring no other to confirm and validate the veracity of this knowledge, but in his grace freely making himself an object of human cognition in order that he may be known by humanity.<sup>130</sup> Breaking with orthodox convention, God is understood not as closed off from humanity but as having made himself the object of knowledge, not fundamentally 'mystery' but personally before humanity by his free decision. Barth's systematics surpasses Schleiermacher's insistence on dependence as an epistemological foundation so that Calvin's quest for knowledge of God can be actualised.

Systematics immediately following Barth displayed a growing emphasis on the economy as determinative for true knowledge of the divine being.<sup>131</sup> Rahner's

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 187-188.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 447-458.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 206-207.

<sup>131</sup> A helpful critical analysis of recent debates in this area can be found in pages 1-32 of Stephen R. Holmes *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers

famous “rule” that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa became ubiquitous.<sup>132</sup> While Rahner’s primary aim was to safeguard the incarnation of the Son as a willing and free act of the entire divine being in line with Barth’s perspective, the legacy of his work in systematics was an increasing general unwillingness to describe the nature of God in any terms that could not be primarily and explicitly grounded in the economy. Jüngel (whose work would be formative in Webster’s early period) proposed that the being of God cannot be conceived of as static but is instead in the process of actualisation through the economy. The Word functions as the basis by which God may be spoken of and known, and so theology becomes a reaction to the reality of Jesus as divine self-revelation. The texts of Scripture are human and conform to the bounds of human language, yet by what they are they reveal that it is possible to think of God as God.<sup>133</sup> Jenson concurs that the narrative of Scripture directs the reader to a divine ontology focused on redemptive progression, which for Jenson proceeds from the God of Israel, the one who raised Jesus, the Father of Jesus, and then finally Our Father by faith.<sup>134</sup> Jenson proposes that in formulating a doctrine of the Trinity the Church’s task is less concerned with specific language and propositions and more

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Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012) with which the present writer is largely in sympathy. See also S. Coakley, “Afterword: “Relational Ontology,” Trinity and Science”, in *The Trinity and an Entangled World* (ed. J. Polkinghorne; Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans): 184-199.

<sup>132</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (trans. Joseph Dunceel; Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oats, 1970), 21-22.

<sup>133</sup> Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 154–157.

<sup>134</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42–45.

with witnessing to the reality of the biblical account of God's hypostatic being.<sup>135</sup> However, Jenson then proceeds further and in a manner more critical of orthodox foundations, citing the origins of a lack of knowledge of the immanent Trinity with Augustine, who divorced any distinction between the persons from their work in the economy.<sup>136</sup> In Jenson's view, there is nothing proper to God which is withheld within the economic history, no "reality of God" behind the economic action. Knowledge and identity of God is thus immediately mediated through the revealed Word rather than being distant.

The increasing focus on the economy as the source of theology led Moltmann to propose a reversal of the essential perspective of theology from human experiences and knowledge of God to his experience and knowledge of humanity. More important to Moltmann than exact doctrinal statements regarding the nature of God is the manner in which God and humanity share in common life, or "friendship", together. God is not "free" in the Barthian sense, but instead finds the fulfilment of his identity in his fellowship with humanity, without which he would not be who he truly is.<sup>137</sup> The concept of eternal identity and the economy has been addressed more recently by Bruce McCormack, who proposed the divine economy as ontologically determinative. Barth's error, according to McCormack,

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 110-113.

<sup>137</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 55-58.

was to establish some basis for divine freedom separate from his grace in Jesus Christ, which should be considered the ultimate free act.<sup>138</sup> While Barth followed the standard pattern of addressing the doctrine of the Trinity before the doctrine of election, McCormack believes that this order needs to be reversed.<sup>139</sup> While the boldness of McCormack's position is appropriately challenging, it should be remembered that an ontologically determinative interpretation of the economy introduces a narrative element to the godhead that may undermine relational confidence. How might we know, for example, whether the shifting parameters by which God is to be known through the economy results in either a lack of the possibility of true knowledge on the one hand or a universalism deriving from the "truth" of individual perceptions on the other? Might Webster's 'theological theology' provide a more identifiably Christian method by which to proceed?

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<sup>138</sup> McCormack, "The Actuality of God", 234-238. Molnar (*Divine Freedom*, 64) questions whether it is possible to view the immanent and economic trinities in the way McCormack proposes without making God somehow dependent on what is meant to be his free decision of election. Elsewhere he contends, "I do not believe Barth ever would have wanted to revise these statements because by making them, he was acknowledging God's freedom *in se* and *ad extra*. But if one views the Trinity through the lens of a Christology that is determined by a doctrine of election thought to offer the key to understanding both doctrines, that is the problematic conclusion that follows." ("Orthodox and Modern: Just How Modern was Barth's Later Theology?", *TT* 67/1 (2010), 54.) In other words, Molnar has identified a logical inconsistency in Barth's theology. While he doesn't agree with McCormack's conclusion he sees how he would have gotten there from how Barth had framed the issue.

<sup>139</sup> Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology", in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (ed. John Webster; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 101-103.

Recent years have seen an increasing interest in pre-modern systematics on the transcendence of God as a primary concern and a focus on divine simplicity.<sup>140</sup> Rather than simply restating historical formula, more significant contributions have used the concept of simplicity as a corrective to systematics which have relied too heavily on economic concerns. White, for example, utilises the contributions of Aquinas on divine simplicity found in personal modes of subsistence as a means of dialogue with the modern perspective of Barth and Swinburne.<sup>141</sup> Sonderegger represents perhaps the strongest reaction in recent times to the post-Barthian emphasis on Christology and the economy as the source of knowledge for the divine nature and attributes. While not rejecting questions regarding the nature of God, Sonderegger's preface to the first volume of her systematics reveals that her primary concern is the mysterious Nature that presupposes any revelation. In contrast to those such as Moltmann, who stated that an attempt at monotheism that did not proceed from Christology would ultimately compromise the uniqueness of the Christian doctrine of God, Sonderegger states that the Oneness of God is central to divine identity and the revelation of the Trinity must point to

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<sup>140</sup> Some recent work on this topic includes Jeffrey E. Brower, "Simplicity and Aseity", in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (eds. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 105-128; Gavin Ortlund, "Divine Simplicity in Historical Perspective: Resourcing a Contemporary Discussion", *IJST* 16/4: 436-453; Pui Him Ip, "Re-imagining Divine Simplicity in Trinitarian Theology", *IJST* 18/3 (2016): 274-289.

<sup>141</sup> Thomas Joseph White, "Divine Simplicity and the Holy Trinity", *IJST* 18/1 (2016): 66-93.

and confirm that Oneness.<sup>142</sup> Such concerns for maintaining the ultimate place for God-in-himself will be similarly expressed by Webster.

As Webster comes to formulate his own contribution to the discussion on the “perfections” of God, he prefers to view the nature of God as one of “perfection” in a material rather than a formal sense. That is, Webster objects to a systematic reliant on apophatic descriptions of what God is not via processes of abstraction rather than positive formulae of who God truly is derived from the self-revelation of the divine person in the gospel. He states:

The Christian theological concept of God’s perfection is an attempt to give conceptual expression to the great divine tautology: I am who I am; part of the force of that tautology is that God both specifies his own perfection and declares it in the enactment of himself.<sup>143</sup>

For Webster, therefore, God is not a being in whom certain qualities find perfection, but instead a being who is in himself utterly *perfect*. As God has revealed himself, he is not engaged in an act of self-perfection as if his being needed

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<sup>142</sup> Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), xi-xv. It should be remembered that the “Mystery of the Trinity” that Sonderegger introduces in this volume is intended to be addressed fully in the subsequent volume of her systematics, which at this time remains unpublished. It is impossible, therefore, to satisfactorily assess at present how Sonderegger proposes to maintain a distinct knowledge of the Persons within this emphasis on Oneness and so her views on the divine knowledge and perfections can at present only be regarded as tentative.

<sup>143</sup> John Webster, “Introduction”, 2.

completion, but rather he is restating within created limits the reality of his eternal perfection:

As *causa sui*, the perfect God owes his being to no other reality than himself. His being is self-originating, self-moving, self-explicating, self-fulfilling; but what God originates, moves, explicates, and fulfils as *causa sui* is *himself*. The perfect God is *causa sui*, this one.<sup>144</sup>

In accord with Barth, Webster views such perfection as ultimately Trinitarian, with the love of God extending outwards to embrace the creature to accomplish a perfection for the created order. He interprets contemporary disinterest in God's perfection as at least partially stemming from the aversion to contemplation of the immanent Trinity in contemporary "extrinsicist theologies" which have focused more on contemporary application. In this Webster's systematic displays sympathy for the concern with divine simplicity found in the work of those such as Sonderegger.

Webster perceives an implicit command and prohibition when taking account of God's perfection. The command is that such a theology must derive from the spheres in which God himself has declared the presence of his Trinitarian being. The prohibition is that we must be forbidden from looking outside of these

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<sup>144</sup> John Webster, "God's Perfect Life", in *God's Life in Trinity* (eds. Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 143.

ordained spheres. In his works, God makes himself present to his creatures and summons them to know and love him.<sup>145</sup> For Webster, a theology of divine perfection must contain a distinct and ordered place for the immanent and economic aspects of perfection. Webster notes the temptation of theology to favour one over the other, further commenting that while immanent predominance has receded in recent history economic theologies have come to dominate to the exclusion of the immanent perfection. He explicitly notes the work of Jenson in this respect, with the self-identity of God in dramatic coherence being labelled as “startling”.<sup>146</sup> Webster treats the terms “immanent” and “economic” as having only limited significance in themselves, but identifies that they are useful in that they point to the reality of the witness of God in Scripture. Webster appears to prefer the concepts taken from Dormer of “self-preservation” and “self-communication”, which he describes as “less formal and more material”.<sup>147</sup> God has self-preservation in that he has eternal perfection and has none who can contend with him. This perfection is not static but enacted, as Barth noted, with his perfect freedom. His perfection is seen in his life and movement. In addressing the views of Jüngel, God is “being in becoming” not in the sense that he has a personal defect that must be fulfilled in action, but in an eternal act of self-realisation. As such, God can be said to have true life in himself.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 144-145.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 147-148.

## ii. Aseity and Inseity

The concept of divine aseity is one that will feature prominently in Webster's doctrine of God. Principally referring to the notion of God as self-dependent<sup>149</sup> the term was taken by Barth as the absolute independent freedom that God has to be God For Us.<sup>150</sup>

An examination of Webster's theological work reveals a central place for divine aseity with respect to his views on the simplicity God. As has been shown, while aseity had been a feature of classical orthodoxy and had been given some attention by Barth it had little place in modern discussions which concentrated on economic activity as the source of knowledge, and in the case of McCormack a determining factor, of the Trinitarian being. In contrast, Webster notes that Barth's method of addressing the doctrine of God broke with the process of much philosophical theology which tends to begin with proofs of the existence of the divine before moving onto describing the divine nature. Barth's method sought to guard not only the centrality of aseity but also the particularity of the true revelation of God

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<sup>149</sup> A historical summary can be found in Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 230-235.

<sup>150</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 306. In more recent times Holmes has returned to the theme to propose that the reality of aseity as grounded in the eternal hyperstatic union of divine persons is revealed in the economy with the result that the eternal self-determined relationship of love may be perceived. See Christopher R. J. Holmes, "The Aseity of God as a Material Evangelical Concern", *JRT* 8 (2014): 61-78.

in Jesus.<sup>151</sup> Taking inspiration from Barth, Webster re-engages with the concept of aseity not only to reinforce theological confidence in divine self-existence but eventually how aseity is then displayed in economic action which Webster labels “inseity”.

In approaching the question of aseity, Webster believes that the primary question is one of Who rather than What. That is, a Christian concept of aseity does not just ask what must be true of a self-existent deity but instead who is the Triune God who exists in himself and has made himself known by his acts? Any attempt at a theology must approach God’s immanent and relative perfections through the self-existence of the Holy Trinity, the free self-communication that is grounded in this self-existence and sufficiency, and its content determined by the free acts through which God has ordained to be known.<sup>152</sup> He states:

The concept of aseity tries to indicate God’s identity; it is not so much a comprehensive definition of God as a gesture towards God’s objective and self-expressive form.<sup>153</sup>

Aseity for Webster is therefore not a general or accidental construct but instead one that is both particular and relational. Humanity is called to know a particular God

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<sup>151</sup> John Webster, *Barth*, 76.

<sup>152</sup> John Webster, “Life in and of Himself: Reflections on God’s Aseity”, in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (ed. Bruce L. McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 107-108.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

who has grounds for his own self-existence and thus to reflect that disclosed self-knowledge through the forms of relational engagement. Such a relational definition will later be significant for his approach to the attributes, specifically for his formula for divine holiness.

Webster critically identifies the contemporary employment of aseity as reflecting a primarily contrastive rather than the absolute sense found in church Fathers such as Augustine and Anselm. By such usage, aseity is oriented as a contrast to a metaphysic of created and observable order that implies contingency as the necessary governing principle rather than the gracious revelation of the God who must be known as entirely self-fulfilled.<sup>154</sup> Webster notes the influence in modern theological discourse of Clark (who treated aseity functionally as required of a being who created the material world rather than deriving its essence from divine self-being), Schleiermacher (for whom nothing denoted by the concept of “aseity” that was not covered by “omnipotence” and “eternity”), and Tillich (for whom aseity was the principle of causality) who by degrees have shifted the frame of reference for aseity from God in himself to material contrasts.<sup>155</sup> It is clear from his argument that Webster desires to reclaim divine aseity from such contrastive usage and orient it back towards a more classical framework

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 109-110.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 111.

Webster thus rejects aseity as a property that must be externally ascribed to God and instead frames it, as Barth had contended, as a marker of God's self-willed existence as Trinity. In fact, it is "the perfection of paternity, filiation, and spiration" which primarily characterises God's life *a se*.<sup>156</sup> As such, the frame of reference for divine aseity is not comparative with the created order but is God in relation with himself, and thus becomes a uniquely Christian confession. In thus orienting aseity towards the Trinity, Webster proposes that divine aseity is both immanent and economic, found both in God in himself and God giving of himself. The immanent has epistemic priority, but the immanent is inextricably linked to the actions of God in revelation and redemption. Thus, to be uniquely Christian, aseity must be centred hypostatically, taking its strength from the eternal divine relationships: "Aseity is *life*: God's life *from* and therefore *in* himself. This life is the relations of Father, Son and Spirit."<sup>157</sup> In considering the form of this aseity, Webster describes it in identifiably Thomist form as:

...the eternal lively plentitude of the Father who begets, the Son who is begotten, and the Spirit who proceeds from both. To speak of God's aseity is thus to speak of the spontaneous, eternal, and unmoved movement of his being-in-relation as Father, Son and Spirit. This movement, without cause of condition and depending on nothing other than itself, is God's being from

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 114.

himself. In this perfect circle of paternity, filiation and spiration, God is who he is.<sup>158</sup>

In this, Webster maintains the classical distinction between the aseity common to all divine persons and the aseity proper to the Father alone. While all Persons have aseity of substance, the Father has aseity of Person which is not proper to the Son or Spirit who are begotten and proceed respectively. This distinction in aseity does not denote an inferiority in the Trinity, as the Son, for example, has an eternal generation from the Father. Filiation and spiration therefore are the forms of divine aseity rather than being contradictions of it.<sup>159</sup> It is therefore clear that, in line with Aquinas, as Webster expounds his view on aseity he follows his founding theological principles of commencing with a doctrine of God founded on Trinitarian relations rather than abstract principles of being.

Following on from his Trinitarian foundations, Webster then moves on to consider aseity with respect to the divine economy. In what initially appears to be a contrast to the classical orthodox foundations with which he started, Webster holds that God's aseity in his inner Trinitarian life must be considered alongside his works of revelation and redemption which correspond to that internal life.<sup>160</sup> Divine self-existence is not a matter of self-containment, but eternal relations of the persons

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 115-116.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 119.

overflow in grace in divine action. To demonstrate that this does not make divine aseity contingent upon such works, he appeals to similar arguments made in the exegesis of John 5 by both Augustine and Calvin. These suggest that aseity goes beyond a lack of external causation to the eternal life which God is in himself expressed in both intra-trinitarian and redemptive dimensions.<sup>161</sup> Webster notes that in both Augustine and Calvin the life and operation of the Son is focused on the mission of God to bring “life” to the world through sharing the inner life of God with humanity. The economy is thus not a concession to the aseity of the Trinity but an expression of it as the self-determined God determines to share life with his image-bearers. In contrast to his peers who have presented the being of God as realised in economic action, Webster fulfils the second part of his theological formula by maintaining the aseity of God’s life in Trinity while connecting it to his works of redemption and revelation.

It is at this point that Webster proposes the term “inseity” to describe the overflowing of divine aseity to the creature through a plan for revelation and restoration. The description centres on the economic activity of the Son and Spirit as they extend the love and life of the Father, but a careful examination of Webster’s employment of the term reveals the importance of the relational intention and outcomes that are inherent.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 120-123.

Aseity is not only the absence of external causation but the eternal life which God in and of himself *is*. It is therefore (following the Gospel's usage) *inseity* as much as *aseity*. This life cannot be conceived apart from the mutual relation of Father and Son; its perfection includes the perfect mutuality of the Father's giving of life to the Son, who in his turn has life in himself. Nor can it be conceived apart from its overflowing plenitude in giving itself to creatures. God's aseity, although it marks God's utter difference from creatures, does not entail his isolation, for what God is and has of himself is life and this life includes a self-willed movement of love.<sup>162</sup>

Implicit in this description by Webster is a direct relationship between the eternal life of God-in-himself, the activity by which God will re-establish his place as Creator and Lord, and the drawing in of humanity to love and fellowship with their God. It may be conceivable that God may be self-determined in Trinity and that he may act for the benefit of his creation while remaining in isolation, distinct from it while fulfilling love entirely within his own being. But for Webster the reality of the Trinity and the union of God with humanity in the incarnation reveals a new *relational* reality. The inseity of God includes the establishment and maintenance of fellowship with humanity that is achieved through the work of the Son. Webster does not dwell on this point and the reader must speculate as to exactly how he envisioned the inseity of God would function in ongoing fellowship with

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 123 (emphasis original).

humanity.<sup>163</sup> However, in acknowledging this reality Webster realises the third part of his theological formula by connecting divine aseity to relational outcomes

In summary, Webster places high importance on divine aseity as a framework for understanding the reality of the divine being of God. The aseity of God is not comparative, but essentially and materially describing the self-determining reality of God as Trinity. This aseity of the immanent Trinity is then expressed in the economy, as God self-wills to act in revelation and redemption and thus draw creation into a new relational reality. Webster thus provides a foundational aspect of divine self-existence that functions as a key principle for considering the attributes of God more broadly.

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<sup>163</sup> A potential outworking of this theme may be discerned in the function of divine election in creating redeemed community. The covenant community of Israel is considered blessed by the God who has chosen them as his people, a choice determined by no factor except divine self-determinism (e.g. Ps 33:12). The unconditional call of Christ transforms his followers from servants to “friends” that they may replicate his life of love (Jn 15:15-17). The choice of those whom God has eternally predestined flows from his own love and for his glory (Eph 1:4-6) and this divine choice contrasts with the expectations of the world as it is rooted in divine determination rather than earthly power or wisdom (1 Cor 1:27-29).

### iii. The Divine Attributes<sup>164</sup>

Debate regarding the divine attributes has not always progressed in an easy or even linear manner given the diversity of exegetical and metaphysical emphases and presuppositions present among the principle contributors.<sup>165</sup> While a comprehensive analysis of recent debate is beyond the scope of this section, several points must necessarily be acknowledged in order to construct a subsequent analysis of Webster's approach.

Once again, Barth's perspective has proven foundational for the shape of recent debate. He determined the apprehension of the divine Being in his act is realised in the eternal perfections of Love and Freedom, which are foundational to God's Trinitarian identity and any further perfections by which he may be described. With respect to love, Humanity then receives God's being as the one who has initiated a fellowship of love. What God has created between himself and us is an extension of his own identity as the one who loves.<sup>166</sup> Barth prefers to denote the divine attributes as "perfections", as the diverse manifestations of God loving in

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<sup>164</sup> Webster prefers the use of the term "attributes" as opposed to many of his post-Barthian contemporaries who employ "perfections". However, as noted earlier, Webster retains a concept of the "perfection" of the life of God in his systematic, which means he will occasionally use the latter term. In analysing Webster's thought the present study will use the term "attributes" in keeping with his more usual practice.

<sup>165</sup> A helpful summary of the main areas of contention that have affected the modern discussion of the attributes can be found in Stephen R. Holmes, "The Attributes of God" in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (eds. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54-71.

<sup>166</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 271-276.

freedom.<sup>167</sup> The multiplicity of perfections function to reflect the glory of God as revealed to humanity rather than essential division.<sup>168</sup> Indeed, Barth views the multiplicity as evidence of the “wealth” of the one God, as the distinction in the perfections testifies to divine unity and simplicity.<sup>169</sup> The multiplicity of the perfections derives not from divine participation or connection with other beings but only in who God is in himself.<sup>170</sup> According to Barth, this reality forms the basis of treating the perfections according to either God’s love or freedom.<sup>171</sup>

While not utilising a similar language of “perfections”, Jüngel also centred discussion of the attributes around the issue of language regarding the revelation. God has not only come into the world, but into the possibility of human language to testify to this reality.<sup>172</sup> Because Jüngel framed the doctrine of the attributes through a soteriological lens, all attributes (including the relative attribute of holiness) are essentially communicable, thus contrasting with Barth, who viewed

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 331-333.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 333-334. Barth implies here that the perfections have their origin not in the economic but in the immanent Trinity, yet the distinction may not be so easily drawn. Sonderegger observes that Barth’s approach across this section of *Church Dogmatics* indicates that Barth understood the perfections within the revealed reality of Christ who has become “God with us”. See Sonderegger, “Divine Perfections”, 461.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 343-344.

<sup>172</sup> Eberhardt Jüngel, “Theses on the Relation of the Existence, Essence, and Attributes of God”, trans. Philip G. Ziegler, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 17 (2001): 55.

the freedom produced through Christ's work as resulting in covenant fellowship.<sup>173</sup> Jenson maintains that any predicates of God are simply those that arise out of a speaking of the gospel.<sup>174</sup> God must be regarded as inherently knowable, which is framed as primarily a divine self-knowledge that humanity is invited into through knowledge of the economy and of the moral will of God.<sup>175</sup> But even this possibility appears limited:

God is not hidden because he holds back some part of the self-knowing he shares with us, but because that self-knowing is alive and moving and we cannot keep up with its moral intentions. Our ignorance of God is not a sort of balance to our knowledge of him; it is that we cannot at any moment of his life with us fully understand what he is up to next.<sup>176</sup>

Given such a restriction, it is hardly surprising that Jenson does not feel that there could ever exist a sufficient list of attributes or perfections to speak of God beyond the economy.

Attempts to advance a particular attribute as foundational for Christian consideration have also contributed to subsequent discussion. Torrance, for example, proposed the attribute of unchangableness as central – God always will be

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<sup>173</sup> Eberhardt Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth* (trans. John Webster; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 141–142.

<sup>174</sup> Jenson, 223.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 224–225.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 233.

who he will be, a Being-in-Community for himself and for creation known in Word and Act.<sup>177</sup> In contrast to those such as Jenson and McCormack, who held that the godhead was somehow completed in the economy, he states, “His Becoming is not a becoming on the way toward being or toward a fullness of being, but is the eternal fullness and the overflowing of his eternal unlimited Being.”<sup>178</sup>

More recently, however, dogmatic attention has shifted back towards an understanding of the divine attributes grounded in aseity. Jeremy Wynne argues that the perfections of God are not merely philosophical abstractions or qualities able to be separated from the divine persons but are instead authorised descriptions of the “livingness” of God with and for his people. Since God had life within himself above and prior to creation, the perfections of God are thereby descriptions at every point of a God who is living. They reveal both the way God is and the way he has chosen to announce himself. The perfections testified to in Scripture reveal the God whom humanity has the ability and privilege to know.<sup>179</sup>

From the basis of a knowledge of God in relation and the nature of this God *a se* for which he has already advocated, Webster is able to construct a corresponding

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<sup>177</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Cornerstone; London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 235-240.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>179</sup> Jeremy Wynne, “The Livingness of God; or, the Place of Substance and Dynamism in a Theology of the Divine Perfections”, *IJST* 13/2 (2011): 191–196.

systematic of the divine attributes that engages with the issues regarding the possibilities for formulation raised by his contemporaries. While Webster's earlier systematic analysis of the attributes reflected his initial immersion in 20<sup>th</sup> century formulations, his later work indicated a shift to a focus on divine simplicity that corresponded with the growing influence of Augustine and Aquinas on his dogmatic perspective more broadly.

In Webster's framework, questions about the divine nature can only be answered by direct reference to divine identity revealed through engagement rather than by appeal to abstract notions of "divine" philosophical or ethical attributes. As has been demonstrated, Webster agrees with other post-Barthians in holding that God can only be known through his free acts. In considering the attributes of immensity and ubiquity he notes that knowledge of the attributes has been distorted in recent studies (by those such as Swinburn) through commencing the discussion under a framework of "perfect being" theology which has lacked attention to the particularity of God's personal revelation. Consequently, the divine character has been freed from all limitations and portrayed as fundamentally spiritual and incorporeal.<sup>180</sup> Webster proposes that a different methodology, one

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<sup>180</sup> John Webster, "The Immensity and Ubiquity of God", in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 87-89. In discussing this point Webster claims that while these commentators claim solidarity with a classical epistemology there appears to be a lack of consideration of the how a perfect God is known particularly *in Christ* as found in the works of those such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. The accuracy and fairness of this critique is

that seeks the Who rather than the What of God, must be employed if dogmatics is to be Scripturally faithful.

“[D]ogmatics must give precedence to *definition by description* over *definition by analysis*; its account of the being of God and of God’s perfections is to be determined at every point by attention to God’s given self-identification – and thus by biblical-historical description of the particular freedom which God exercises in his lordly acts – rather than by construction of what is fittingly ascribed to a god.”<sup>181</sup>

An understanding of the attributes therefore must necessarily proceed from who God has shown himself to be. There must not be a hard distinction between God In Himself and God For Us, but both operate together. There is therefore an agreement with Barth’s view that constructing a doctrine of the perfections must proceed on the basis of revelation – we only have the possibility of knowing God In Himself as he has first been God For Us.<sup>182</sup>

Webster does not attempt to enforce a priority of relative attributes over the absolute (e.g. that the economic omnipresence of God determines his immanent immensity) but proposes that a proper doctrine of the attributes must seek the

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beyond the scope of the present study. For reference see R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); J. Hoffman and G. S. Rosenkrantz, *The Divine Attributes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 93-94 (emphasis original).

<sup>182</sup> Barth, *CD II/ I*Ibid., 348-350.

truth of the nature of the one perfect God through the nature of his acts of redemption and revelation.<sup>183</sup> He summarises:

...a dogmatic account of God's immensity must follow the rule of all well-ordered thought about the divine perfections, namely, 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 the expense of the other.<sup>184</sup>

Here Webster clearly reveals the connection between divine aseity and economy in constructing a doctrine of the attributes. His description of these two facets as "reciprocally determinative" does not imply a consequentialist relationship but simply one of non-contradiction. As the perfect God has given himself to be known in his revelatory works his character may be described either absolutely regarding his self-determined being or relatively according to the perspective of creation without compromise or confusion.

In addition to the coherence between the absolute and relative, Webster's understanding of God as Trinity becomes fundamental to his view of the divine attributes. He notes with approval the work of those such as Gunton and Krotke, whose recent trinitarian accounts of the divine attributes has done much to advance

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<sup>183</sup> Webster, "Immensity", 91.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

the discussion.<sup>185</sup> While Gunton mirrored Barth in identifying the eternal God from and in his acts, he operates under strict limits in that knowledge of God must be restricted to what God has done, leading to the investigation of who God in his act.<sup>186</sup> In other words, rather than persist in a forced division between the economic and immanent Trinity, Gunton held that discussion of the divine attributes must proceed from the narrative of the economy. Gunton focused on two key questions: how should a theology of the divine attribute be shaped by the divine economy, and what is the relationship between the Trinitarian God and the divine attributes? Calvin's assumption of the Augustinian formula of separating the being of God from his actions bequeathed to the Reformed tradition a view of an unknowable God divorced from the personal actions in which he has revealed himself, a legacy which Gunton believes must be rejected.<sup>187</sup> Knowledge of God

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<sup>185</sup> John Webster, "The Holiness and Love of God", in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London, T&T Clark, 2005), 109. An analysis of Krotke's work on the attributes of God and the impact of the divine character on the social and political systems of a world that has forgotten him may be found in Christopher R. J. Holmes, *Revisiting the Doctrine of the Divine Attributes: In Dialogue with Karl Barth, Eberhard Jüngel and Wolf Krotke* (IST 15; New York: Peter Lang, 2007). In a private conversation with Holmes in 2017 he disclosed to me that further reflection on the work of Aquinas and others in this area had led him to conclude that Krotke's work (while still dogmatically strong) was not quite as unique as he had initially imagined it to be. He admitted that this shift in his own thought was the reason why he had not been motivated thus far to prepare his completed English translation of *Gottes Klarheiten* for final publication.

<sup>186</sup> Gunton, *Act & Being*, 76-77. Gunton's employment of the economy as a source of knowledge for eternal Trinitarian relationships, particularly in his thesis of perichoresis as dynamic mutual engagement, has been challenged by Höhne who found insufficient warrant for such a definition either exegetically or in the theology of the Cappadocian Fathers on whom Gunton primarily depended. See D. A. Höhne, D. A., *What Can We Say About Perichoresis? An Historical, Exegetical and Theological Examination of Colin Gunton's Use of the Concept* (Unpublished MTh thesis; Sydney: Moore Theological College, 2003), 123-131.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

and his attributes must be rooted in knowledge of the persons made possible through the economy of revelation and redemption:

But if we *know* the hypostases – by the mediation of scripture and the church’s life and proclamation – then we know the *substance*, being, essence, *Wesen*, etc., of God, for there is nothing else to be known. The three persons *are* the being of God, and if we know the Father through the Son and in the Spirit we know the being of God.<sup>188</sup>

Gunton here attempted to achieve consistency between his premises regarding the failure of classical metaphysics and his conclusions as to how much may legitimately be claimed regarding the being and character of God by a humanity who encounter him only in the economy.<sup>189</sup> While Webster does not concur with Gunton’s metaphysics, and at one point questions whether Gunton reads Augustine (or indeed a substantial portion of the Western tradition) fairly<sup>190</sup>, his formulation of the attributes does proceed from divine action to the nature of eternal being.

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 112 (emphasis original).

<sup>189</sup> Gunton’s approach has received strong criticism with respect to the extent to which his rejection of a classical metaphysical paradigm can be supported through his Barthian foundations. Sonderegger, for example, labels Gunton as a “militant descendant” of Barth and regards his claims that Christians have “univocal knowledge of God and his attributes” as “provocative”. She notes that that Barth does not directly support the possibility of univocal knowledge as the revelation of God in Jesus was essentially personal rather than epistemological and should thus be treated in a much more dynamic fashion. See Sonderegger, “Divine Perfections”, 451-462. Such criticism should be tempered by the fact that at other points Gunton’s theology remained grounded in classical assumptions, such as the absolute distinction between Creator and creation *ex nihilo*.

<sup>190</sup> John Webster, “Systematic Theology after Barth: Jüngel, Jenson, and Gunton”, in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; eds. David F. Ford & Rachel Muers; Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 259.

In approaching the attributes from a Trinitarian perspectives Webster advances this definition:

A Christian dogmatics of the divine perfections is a positive science in the church of Jesus Christ whose task is the rational articulation of the singular identity of God the Holy Trinity, freely presented in the works of God's triune being.<sup>191</sup>

Webster is advocating that, as God has given himself to be known, the exercise of knowing him is a task that may be positively approached by the community of faith, with the source of knowledge being found in the free revelation of divine works. Such a definition conforms to the pattern laid out elsewhere by Webster in his views on the task of theology as redeemed thinking in the presence of God in Scripture. The nature of the task Webster identifies here is worthy of careful attention. A doctrine of the attributes according to this definition is concerned with an articulation of an "identity". The attributes are most properly personal. As the attributes, whether absolute or relative, are identified and expounded the people of God recognise his identity through what he has chosen to reveal. Such a pattern can be clearly recognised in Scripture, such as the call on Israel to know the character of the God of redemption through the nature of his redemptive works (Deut 4:34-35). Or Christ's direction to his disciples that their knowledge of the

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 110.

Father in heaven is fulfilled in their observation and knowledge of the character of the Son (Jn 14:6-7). The one who is to be known, according to Webster, is “God the Holy Trinity”. No distinction is made between immanent and economic, but it is assumed that the attributes belong to the one identity of God as Holy Trinity which has been freely presented in his triune works. As Webster goes on to state, if this is the case then the attributes of God are not properly ascribed but confessed because the acts of God are to be properly understood with respect to the fellowship that God has within himself and deriving their force from his life of love.<sup>192</sup> Also worthy of note here is the identity of this triune God as a “Holy Trinity”. Exactly what it means for this Trinity to be considered as “holy” in Webster’s systematic will be the principle subject of the next two chapters.

Ultimately for Webster, the conception of the divine attributes flows from his convictions regarding of the nature of theology more broadly as requiring a personal encounter with the God of the gospel:

Theological talk of the divine attributes is thus not primarily a matter of categorization but of confession; the attributes of God are conceptual glosses on God’s name, indicators of God’s identity. It was for this reason that the classical dogmatic tradition insisted that when theology enumerates a range of different attributes of God, it is not denoting different realities within the

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

divine being; rather, each of the attributes designates the totality of the being of God under some particular aspect.<sup>193</sup>

Essentially, Webster affirms an Augustinian concept of divine simplicity that affirms the various attributes as testifying to the one essence of God experienced in a multitude of ways.<sup>194</sup> He later identifies the attributes as “character trait predicates”, or descriptions of the personal nature of God in his history of economic activity towards his creation.<sup>195</sup> As God is known in his Word and works the Church is directed to how they are to relate to him. Indeed, Webster wants to deny that there are any attributes that are essentially non-relational, but instead both those of absolute and relative character will impact the confessional and relational life of the Church.<sup>196</sup> This will become particularly pertinent in Webster’s thesis that the holiness of God is expressed directly in and sets the agenda of the holy life of the church.

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<sup>193</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 37.

<sup>194</sup> This is in agreement with Calvin’s comments on the metaphysical question: “But although philosophers discourse in grand terms of this eternity, and Plato constantly affirms that God is peculiarly τὸ οὐν (the Being); yet they do not wisely and properly apply this title, viz., that this one and only Being of God absorbs all imaginable essences...Wherefore, in order rightly to apprehend the one God, we must first know, that all things in heaven and earth derive at His will their essence, or subsistence from One, who only truly is. From this Being all power is derived; because, if God sustains all things by his excellency, he governs them also at his will.” John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (Calvin’s Commentaries vol.2; trans. Charles William Bingham; Edinburgh: Baker, 2009), 73-74.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

### **c. Conclusion**

It is possible to make several observations regarding Webster's doctrine of God and the attributes from the current analysis. First, his doctrine of God tends more towards a framework of classical Reformed theology than some others in his post-Barthian context. His thought emphasises, in sympathy with Barth, the life of the one perfect God in Trinity but unlike those such as Gunton and McCormack his reading of Scripture leads him to embrace a more classical metaphysic centred on divine aseity. Second, his theological method advances the self-determination of God via a central affirmation of aseity in being and inseity of God in works. Third, Webster's doctrine of divine attributes is centred Trinitarianly and is directed towards relational ends. Attributes are not descriptions of a divine What but personal characteristics of a divine Who. In the economy of revelation and salvation God as Trinity has given himself to be known and to be related to according to his will. From here it will be shown how the divine attribute of holiness conforms to this pattern and becomes fulfilled in God's life with and in the redeemed community and individual.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### JOHN WEBSTER ON THE HOLINESS OF GOD

The previous chapters of the present study have introduced and clarified the necessary criteria by which an evaluation of John Webster's views on the holiness of God will be evaluated. Chapter Two outlined Webster's vision of theology as a unique discipline of thought offering an alternative to and correction of the standard methods of the academy, his belief that Holy Scripture is an inspired authenticated witness to the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus Christ and thus authoritative for theology, and his thesis that true theology consists in redeemed thinking about God in his presence as an activity of the Church. Such beliefs resulted in his proposing a threefold pattern for theology as it deals with God in his Trinitarian life, in his actions of revelation and redemption, and in his life of fellowship with humanity as the nexus between the two. Chapter Three addressed Webster's work on the aseity and attributes of God as necessary prolegomena to consideration of holiness. Some brief reflections on the history of debate regarding these topics demonstrated the shift in methodology which has taken place as the focus on the transcendence and unknowability of God indicative of classical orthodoxy in the Reformed tradition was challenged in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by Karl Barth and others who placed a greater emphasis on the economy as a primary foundation for knowledge regarding the divine nature and attributes. It was shown

that Webster's relational systematics was an attempt to bridge these perspectives. His return to the aseity of God as central to an understanding of the divine being found a logical consequent in the inseity by which God reveals and acts for humanity in order to establish fellowship with them. The attributes of God serve a relational function as by them the Church is concerned more with Who the God is that they must relate to rather than What this God is in his unknowable being.

The present study will now examine the works of John Webster in relation to the topic of the perfection of divine holiness. As will be shown, Webster's approach to this question is embedded within the post-Barthian Reformed tradition and he is engaged with the thoughts of Barth and his successors. Nevertheless, it is clear that Webster's theological method and approach seeks to direct the discussion much closer to the classical orthodox tradition than many of his contemporaries as he employs a renewed emphasis on divine aseity as a foundation for his understanding of the nature of the triune God and the divine perfections. In his work, Webster appear engaged in a project to bring the Reformed orthodox position more into line with post-Barthian thought by not allowing either the immanent or economic Trinity to dominate a doctrine of the perfections. To this end, Webster recasts a definition of divine holiness away from moral perfection or economic actions and instead as a mode of relation by which God determines to reveal himself and reconcile humanity by his covenant-establishing presence.

The present chapter will provide an analysis of Webster's theology of divine holiness in order to determine how well it accords with the standards of systematic theology which he had proposed in his broader work. The definition of divine holiness that Webster advances will be discussed with reference to his place for the immanent Trinity, economic Trinity, and the fellowship created by God determining to be "the holy one in our midst". The chapter will determine how Webster's theological framework provides insight into his doctrine of divine holiness. In accordance with Webster's own advancement of theology as an activity of redeemed thinking on divine revelation his use of Scripture and historical theology to support his conclusions will be the standard by which his work will be judged.

#### **a. Webster's "Trinitarian Dogmatic of Holiness"**

As Webster introduces his seminal monograph on the topic (on which this analysis is primarily dependent) he states that his desire is to construct "a trinitarian dogmatic of holiness."<sup>197</sup> To a large extent his unpacking of this aim accords with the pattern of the theological method which he has advanced in other works. Yet a number of observations may be made regarding divine holiness in the characteristic

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<sup>197</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 1.

as well as the descriptive sense within the trinitarian dogmatic he is aiming to construct.

In proposing that the task of formulating a theology of holiness is an activity proper to the Church, Webster notes the limits of this activity as demarcated by the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ which is the foundation of the Church.

Theology is not free thought or speech, if by ‘free’ we mean unattached to any given set of object or any given sphere of inquiry. Theology is not free speech but *holy speech*. It is set apart for and bound to its object – that is, the gospel – and to the fellowship of the saints in which the gospel is heard as divine judgement and consolation – that is, the Church. Only as it does its work under the tutelage, authority and protection of the Church is theology free.<sup>198</sup>

As theology is bound by the common sphere of faith found in the Church, so it may be assured to reach its end. Indeed, the apostolic instructions to the early church contained such directives, as the unity and love of the redeemed community facilitated the acquisition of wisdom and understanding to protect the Church from error (Col 2:2-4). Yet Webster’s theological emphasis on the historical redemption and his broad dialogue across dogmatic traditions begs the question as to how he perceives the boundaries of the defined Church. To what extent does the Church

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 2 (emphasis mine).

exercise authority over theology, and by which magisterium or instrument of enforcement is this authority realised. Webster clarifies this authority:

Theology is thus under the authority of the Church because the Church in its turn is under the wholly legitimate and quickening authority of the truth of the gospel. And theology is under the Church's protection because what safeguards theology's truthfulness is not the exercise of critical scruple but the fear of the one who is the Church's Lord.<sup>199</sup>

For Webster, therefore, the authority of a holy dogmatic rests on the reality that it takes place as an authorised activity of the Church which in turn is under the authority of Christ. In doing so, the Church fulfils its calling as a foundation and pillar of truth (1 Tim 3:15) and proceeds in an ongoing life of true worship not only in Spirit but also in truth (Jn 4:23-24).<sup>200</sup> Such a description is consistent with his desire for a uniquely 'theological theology' outlined in an earlier chapter. The constitution of the Church therefore is confessional in nature – a redeemed community which faithfully confesses Jesus as Lord is the context for a dogmatic of holiness. Where this confession is deficient or denied there does not exist an authoritative Church. Consequently, theology serves the church by proclaiming the gospel to the Church so that confession of the truth will be enabled. This will

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>200</sup> While at this point it is not made explicit whether Webster views the authority of Christ that the Church is under includes a place for divine judgment if the Word is not heeded or applied, it is clear from his later consideration of the "negative holiness" of God that this aspect of authority forms part of his dogmatic schema.

become pertinent in the subsequent chapter where Webster's view of the holiness of God in the Church and individual will be examined.

The shape of theology which Webster is pursuing in his account of divine holiness is defined by the reality that it is itself an exercise of holiness. He provides the following definition:

A Christian theology of holiness is an exercise of holy reason; it has its context and its content in the revelatory presence of the Holy Trinity which is set forth in Holy Scripture; it is a venture undertaken in prayerful dependence upon the Holy Spirit; it is an exercise in the fellowship of the saints, service the confession of the holy people of God; it is a work in which holiness is perfected in the fear of God; and its end is the sanctifying of God's holy name.<sup>201</sup>

By this definition Webster distinguishes a theology of holiness as holy reason in three aspects.

First, the object of primary importance is God himself, the one who is truly holy and who determines the standard of holiness in his being. This holy God is not distant or incomprehensible but has an enduring "revelatory presence" in Scripture

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

as a testimony to the incarnate Son who physically revealed the truth of this God (Jn 1:18). For Webster this revelation of God is not primarily an activity enabling cognition but one that enables relation. As the truth of God is revealed in the gospel of Christ humanity is prepared for the activity of fellowship.<sup>202</sup> The entrance of Christ to enact this revelation of eternal divine self-knowledge fulfils God's intention for ongoing fellowship so that his chosen people no longer live primarily in the presence of false gods but in the presence of their Creator and Redeemer (2 Cor 6:16).

Second, the context of this theology is that it takes place as an activity of the redeemed people in the relational communion with this holy God through Word and Spirit. Webster perceives the primary sphere of operation being in Scripture as being an authenticated testimony of the Spirit (2 Pet 1:21) to facilitate understanding and therefore fellowship with God. To this end:

...holy reason is exegetical reason, reason directed by and directed towards the reading of these texts which are the servant or auxiliaries of God's own speaking of his word. In the matter of God's holiness, as in all matters, the fundamental theological responsibility is exegesis.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 18.

As a result, Webster intends to derive his understanding of what constitutes true holiness by the content of the Spirit's instructions in Scripture instead of from abstract moral or philosophical principles. Holiness will be constituted by the one who is the Holy One and therefore bound by the limits which he has given himself to be known by.<sup>204</sup> Nevertheless, in order for such ends to be realised, the Church must continually and prayerfully depend on the operation of the Holy Spirit to guide holy thinking.<sup>205</sup> The ongoing presence of the Spirit of truth was guaranteed by Christ to be counsellor, advocate, and ongoing divine relational presence to the Church (Jn:14:16-17). A theology of holiness is therefore shepherded by the revelation of the holy character of the Trinity revealed in Scripture and the relational presence of the Spirit in the confessing Church. It is evident that Webster's vision for the theological use of Scripture as expressed in his works on systematic method up to this point is being applied here. It is not clear whether, given Webster's later elevation of the historic interpretation of Scripture as authoritative witness, such a theological hermeneutic would have continued to shape a fuller and more mature systematic treatment of the topic.

Third, the engaging in a theology of holiness results in sanctification by which the Church is "perfected" towards the "fear of God" and by which God himself is the one proclaimed as holy. Webster takes 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 as his primary text in

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 24.

describing the necessary rejection of the unclean or unholy things of the world and the embracing of divine fellowship as proceeding ἐν φόβῳ θεοῦ.<sup>206</sup> While a reading that emphasises an attitude of respect over terror should be preferred, Webster prefers to employ “fear” in order to retain an appropriate relative distance between Creator and Creature in this new fellowship. As he states:

Because God is majestic, and therefore to be feared before all things, to encounter him is to be encountered by that which we can never master, which can never become an object, an idea or pattern of words or experience that we can retrieve and inspect at will.<sup>207</sup>

While the immensity of the divine being may never be fully comprehended by finite creation, humanity by divine decree becomes shaped to truly encounter in fellowship the Holy God who reveals himself in word and action. Holy theology will be concerned with how the believer is conformed to the pattern of holiness rather than by how God’s holiness must be accommodated to meet temporal circumstances. Of first concern will be the application of this divine encounter doxologically. The confessions of God as Holy first proclaimed by Israel (e.g. Ps 99:3, 145:21) are now realised in the Church.<sup>208</sup> The instruction of the Son in the most basic of prayers for the redeemed people commences with an address to the Father and a hallowing of his name (Matt 6:9). The holiness of God that has been

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 29.

revealed becomes reflected back as those who have been embraced in fellowship fulfil their calling in confessing the holiness of the one who is truly Holy.

Within these three points, Webster's ideal threefold pattern for dogmatics may be perceived. The holiness of theology is demonstrated in the revelation of God who is Holy, in his actions of revelation in Word and Spirit, and in the ongoing pattern of fellowship between God and Church that results. For Webster, to meditate on the reality of divine holiness is to participate in a holy activity.

### **b. The Holiness of God**

As has been noted, Reformed systematics prior to Barth did not have an agreed definition of holiness. It variously referred to either a moral or personal separation of God from this world, a pureness of spirit, or righteousness in justice. However, the attribute of holiness was consistently understood as deriving from the character of God in himself, and thus properly belonging to the immanent Trinity.<sup>209</sup> Barth's systematic classified holiness as one of the perfections of Divine Love, along with righteousness and wisdom.<sup>210</sup> It functions as the perfecting agent of grace, the mode of God's being that enacts fellowship with creation, thus placing holiness as a

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<sup>209</sup> Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School: a Study in Method and Content* (SRT 25; Boston: Brill, 2013), 231.

<sup>210</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 352.

covenantal perfection.<sup>211</sup> In other words, God is holy in that as he establishes and maintains fellowship he remains the Lord whose will cannot be opposed or superseded.<sup>212</sup> God is always God in the covenant relationship as He maintains a uniqueness that conquers all resistance.

When we speak of holiness, we think of this same freedom which God proves by the fact that in this turning towards the other He remains true to Himself and makes His own will prevail...The bond between the concepts of grace and holiness consists further in the fact that both point to God's transcendence over the resistance which His being and action encounters from the opposite side.<sup>213</sup>

Barth interpreted holiness as functioning as the link between grace and divine freedom, to make the acts of God For Us dependent on the eternal identity of God In Himself. The fact that God is holy means that he can not only exercise divine love through grace, but he can remain free while doing so. To understand God's holiness is to recognise his place as judge over us and to acknowledge that his judgment is gracious.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 353.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 362-363.

In the post-Barth context a variety of theological accounts of divine holiness have been advanced. Pannenberg, for example, connected the holiness of God to his “eternity”, in that for God to be holy is to be eternally separate from all that is profane and to judge all that threatens his holy character. In the incarnation this holiness offers up the possibility of salvation and hope for those who are brought into fellowship with God through Jesus. The holy God enters into the profane world and both judges and sanctifies it.<sup>215</sup>

In discussing holiness specifically Jüngel’s language mirrors Barth as “God is holy because in as much as he passes judgment upon and negates nothingness, he is glorious precisely in doing so.”<sup>216</sup> This divine holiness includes within itself the act of reconciliation. Holiness is a communicable attribute as it is God who sanctifies, but the exact nature of this sanctification as related to God’s holiness is not made explicit.<sup>217</sup>

Gunton’s preference for knowing God through the role of the persons in the economy is reflected in his treatment of the attributes in general and holiness in

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<sup>215</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 397-401. Pannenberg’s view rests on the traditional understanding of holiness as primarily “separate out from” rather than “separate into”. While stating that holiness is an activity of the collective Trinity rather than any one personal, he does include “fellowship” as a distinct sphere of holy action.

<sup>216</sup> Jüngel, “Theses”, 71.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

particular. He again laments the history of a negative theology of the attributes, highlighted in Augustine's apophatic approach to the concept of divine persons. Consequently, the tradition has tended to ascribe the attributes to God as a monad rather than the persons.<sup>218</sup> As such, Gunton returns to economy, stating that the holiness of God is seen in the consistency between his being and action, most particularly demonstrated at the cross.<sup>219</sup> He retains a place for holiness within the immanent Trinity as eternal perfection of personal love in relation to himself and his acts towards us, but any human experience of this is only through the economy as the ascended Christ through the agency of the Spirit presents humanity to the heavenly-located Father.<sup>220</sup> Consequently, the holiness of the Christian has a decidedly eschatological flavour:

The Spirit makes holy: that is to say, makes things by anticipation what they will be when presented perfected before the throne of God the Father.<sup>221</sup>

In order to reconcile such divergent perspectives and having established the nature of a theology of holiness more broadly, Webster attempts a consideration of the key question: how exactly is God to be known as holy? Does divine holiness go beyond transcendent freedom, or a negation of nothingness, or ontological

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 117-118.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 118-121.

<sup>221</sup> Gunton, *Act and Being*, 141.

consistency? How may it be possible for God to be holy in himself and holy in his actions without one necessarily compromising the other?

While Webster has stated that the end of a theology of holiness is that God would be confessed as holy it is possible for such a confession to result from circular reasoning (i.e. God is holy, therefore he is confessed as holy, therefore he is holy, etc). Indeed, divine holiness is an attribute not solely confined to the Judeo-Christian deity – a plethora of divine figures have been designated as “holy”, if only as a means of indicating their essential purity or metaphysical difference from those in the profane physical realms. A full and complete account of divine holiness must be characterised by a concern with the true God.<sup>222</sup>

Webster’s account of holiness commences with two claims: first, that the Holy God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (i.e. his holy identity and his Trinitarian identity are in fact the same); and second, that God is the one who is Holy in the midst of his people, as “his holiness is *a mode of relation* to the creatures whom he sanctifies and calls to holiness.”<sup>223</sup> It is how Webster sees this relational aspect of divine holiness intersecting with God’s freedom and love in Trinity that will be of principle concern in the present analysis.

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<sup>222</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 31.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 (emphasis mine).

Webster articulates his definition of the holiness of God clearly:

God's holiness is the holiness of Father, Son and Spirit, the one who bears his holy name, who is holy in all his works, and who is the Holy One in our midst, establishing, maintaining and perfecting righteous fellowship with the holy people of God.<sup>224</sup>

In accordance with his preferred three-part theological method outlined above, it is possible to discern the three distinct aspects in Webster's definition of divine holiness. First, this holiness arises out of the eternal Trinitarian character of the godhead – the one who has made himself known as Father, Son and Spirit. This is consistent with Webster wishing to present the divine attributes as manifestations of the aseity of the nature of the immanent Trinity. Second, God's holiness is presented in the divine economy – God is known as holy in and through his creating, sustaining, and redeeming works in his inseity. Third, and most unique to Webster, God is holy through his intentional presence among his people for the purpose of covenant relationship. His actions of “establishing, maintaining, and perfecting righteous fellowship” are not accidental by-products of his presence or necessary conditions for it, but are instead the means by which this holy presence is

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 32.

realised and finds its fulfilment. Webster's approach to the relationship between three facets of divine holiness will now be considered in detail.

### **i. As Trinity (Immanence)**

Webster commences his analysis onto-theologically by declaring the essence of divine holiness as central to the triune being of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>225</sup> In emphasising the centrality of the nature of the divine being confessed within the Church he places the focus on the Persons revealed in the gospel rather than an abstracted divine essence as the source of holiness. While it may be argued that any theology of divine holiness will inevitably be oriented towards onto-theological concerns, Webster posits that a truly Christian ontology must be consistent with the gospel's account of God's history with his people, and therefore cannot be reduced to a general attempt at a metaphysical theism.<sup>226</sup> As such, he is loathe to concede the ontological ground of dogmatics to any metaphysical framework that is either sceptical of the personal nature of holiness or which seeks to ground it as an experienced phenomenon of religion (e.g. Schleiermacher).<sup>227</sup> There is not, in other words, an objective essence of "holiness" that may be discerned within the created order or that may be appropriated within religious practice. True holiness is found in the one who is Holy and who he has revealed

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

himself to be. Even within the framework of onto-theology, Webster believes that the methodology of philosophical theology tends to improperly preference impersonal perfections such as omniscience and omnipresence, thus directing the focus to the essence of God rather than the character of God's engagement with creation. He instead proposes that exegesis rather than philosophy rightly directs attention to the nature of divine personal interaction rather than abstract conceptions.<sup>228</sup> In short, the triune identity of God is revealed in Scripture as the principle location of divine holiness. This so far is consistent with his framework for a theology of holiness outlined in the previous section.

In addition to holiness being proper to the persons of the Trinity in perichoresis, Webster holds that the triune God is oriented towards relationship as this holiness properly belongs "to the one who bears his holy name". That is, Webster is keen to safeguard the reality that God enacts his holy character in his engagement with creation in speech and action. This God is not essentially mysterious or indefinite in character, as has been proposed in the Lutheran perspectives of Jüngel and Jenson, but has rather spoken in order to be personally known and confessed.<sup>229</sup> In this way, God is acknowledged as holy in that he is the God who rules and redeems, and therefore is confessed as such by his people (e.g. Isa 42:8; 1 Ki 18:39). His holiness is not ascribed to him but is simply acknowledged as being self-

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 36.

evident. In line with his view of the nature of the attributes broadly as “conceptual glosses on God’s name”, Webster believes that to confess God as holy is to recognise and confess the entirety of God’s being. Divine holiness does not belong to one part or person of the godhead but is the means of denoting the entirety of the divine reality. Thus, Webster claims solidarity with the Orthodox position of Staniloae in affirming that “holiness is a predicate of the personal being, action and relations of the triune God, of God’s concrete execution of his simplicity”.<sup>230</sup> It is worth noting that, for Staniloae, it was the relational that was paramount as the eternal relations of perfect love between the Persons provide the foundation for which humanity is to know the triune Being in unity.<sup>231</sup>

At this point a critical issue regarding Webster’s systematic project becomes apparent. It has been demonstrated that Webster holds that the primary frame of reference for divine holiness is to be found in the trinitarian identity of the godhead. To confess the reality of God as holy is to confess him as the one who has revealed himself as Father, Son and Spirit. Yet while Webster is proceeding in a noticeably theological manner in keeping with his stated aims, his argument does not exhibit the exegetical strength that may have been expected from his stated

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>231</sup> Dumitriu Staniloae, *The Holy Trinity: In the Beginning There Was Love* (trans. Roland Clark; Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), 17-28. Webster’s reappraisal of this subject by connecting it to the thought of the eastern tradition appears to be one of those “unexpected footnotes” noted earlier by Sanders. It remains an open question to what extent Webster’s subsequent systematics might have engaged with the eastern Fathers, but his reference to Staniloae suggests that modern Orthodox thought may have begun to pique his interest.

methodology. Webster exhibits a distinct lack of exegetical engagement with the Scriptural witness to the divine persons being uniquely holy, particularly those of the New Testament that proclaim the holy character of the God revealed in the gospel (e.g. Rev 4:8), the identification and confession of the incarnate Son as the holy one of God (e.g. Mk 1:24; Jn 6:69), the operation of the Spirit as the power of God to achieve his purposes (e.g. Lk 1:35; Rom 15:13), or the doxological unity of the divine persons (e.g. 2 Cor 13:13). While this is more a criticism of method rather than substance, this does seem to cut against his expressed aims. Webster first commends exegesis as a principle feature of his dogmatic method but then uses no New Testament exegesis (and only referring in passing to two Old Testament verses, neither of which explicitly refer to holiness) in his commencement of his theology of God – that is, his discussion of the holy God as Trinity.

## **ii. In His Works (Economy)**

Following on from identifying the holiness of God as proper to his identity as Trinity, Webster then moves to consider how God is holy with reference to his economic activity

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God *is* holy; but God is what God does, and so *God's holiness is to be defined out of God's works.*<sup>232</sup>

In making this move, Webster does not appear to have the economic Trinity as fully representative of the divine being (e.g. Rahner) nor does he have the trinitarian nature of the godhead determined by economic action (e.g. McCormack). He has already addressed holiness as proper to God's immanent being which has been enacted personally. We have already seen the place divine aseity has in his theological framework. Instead, by the order in which he addressed these points that he is retaining a Barthian frame of reference, that the works of God must faithfully reflect the character of the God who has ordained them to come to pass. Webster's reiteration of his definition of the attributes as glosses on the divine name demonstrates that he regards the character of the immanent Trinity as remaining fundamentally determinative, but the perception of the Holy Trinity is limited by the economy rather than metaphysical or philosophical presuppositions. The works of God within the created order faithfully reveal the character of the sovereign creator.

What then does the economy reveal regarding the holiness of the divine being? In Webster's view holiness as a character trait predicate is framed primarily with

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<sup>232</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 39 (emphasis original).

reference to a character of relationship and is fulfilled and completed in the establishment of fellowship with humanity:

Talk of God's holiness denotes *the majesty and singular purity* which the triune God is in himself and with which he acts towards and in the lives of his creatures, opposing that which is itself opposed to his purpose as creator, reconciler, and perfecter, and bringing that purpose to its completion in the fellowship of the saints.<sup>233</sup>

God's inner life of holiness therefore encompasses the personal and moral purity that was central to the Reformed understanding but which this is expressed relationally as the Holy Trinity extends the holy perichoretic union to rule, redeem, and purify creation. To acknowledge God as Holy is therefore to perceive that this God and not any other stands in the place of authority to rule. As this God rules he also establishes the possibility of human knowledge of his rule and redemptive acts in the incarnation of the Son and the inspired works of the Spirit.

Divine holiness, therefore, is not synonymous with remoteness or unapproachableness. The Holy God, for Webster, is one who has given himself to be acknowledged in his rule, as one to whom allegiance and obeisance can be

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 41 (emphasis mine).

properly made by knowing subjects. Eternal divine holiness is not compromised by his desire to approach. As Webster emphasises:

Majesty and relation are not opposed moments in God's holiness; they are simply different articulations of the selfsame reality.<sup>234</sup>

In other words, there can be no fundamental tension between relationship and transcendence for God. Because for Webster all perfections are relational, divine holiness is seen as the holy Trinity calls humanity into personal fellowship:

For like an absolute attribute, holiness stresses the divine transcendence; and like a relative attribute, holiness also draws attention to God's work as the world's creator, reconciler and sanctifier.<sup>235</sup>

Webster's further of description of divine holiness as seen in "personal, moral relation" reveals that the attribute retains an ethical quality, as has been traditionally affirmed, but the language here reveals that Webster is concerned more for the standard of relational righteousness rather than adherence to abstract moral standards.<sup>236</sup> True moral relations are therefore found not in virtue divorced from relations, but derive from the manner in which the created order must conform to

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid. In his endnotes on this point Webster is concerned with differentiating his definition from those such as Staniloae and Tillich who emphasised the ineffable nature of divine holiness due to their apophatic presuppositions when approaching the doctrine of God.

the person and will of the Creator. The purity Webster identifies is defined primarily by separation or exaltation above creation but is properly seen in the holy acts by which God extends personally to the creature towards the end of covenant relationship. Such a definition may initially appear to stand at odds with the Torah instructions regarding holy places and items forbidden to a chosen people marked by uncleanness and sin (e.g. Lev 16:16-17). Yet the instruction of the Lord that a “sanctuary”(שֹׁדֵדוֹת) should be built so that he might “dwell among them” (Exod 25:8) reveals that the primary intention of the holy dwelling-place was so that the presence of God might reside within the closest proximity possible to a sinful people who were still precious to him. God, thus, does not profane himself by his approach towards creation in revelation and redemption, but rather his holiness properly belongs in that sphere.

The positive aspects of Webster’s position notwithstanding, the following should be noted regarding Webster’s definition of divine holiness with respect to the economic Trinity. Of primary concern is that, in common with the previous section, Webster fails to deliver adequate exegetical substance in line with the method proposed to support his dogmatic theses. In fact, Webster does not refer to any part of Scripture to support his contention that economic holiness is displayed in majestic relationship and action. This is not to say that such exegetical warrant does not exist for such a position. The holiness of the divine sovereign rule is confessed in the song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:2), and by Ethan the Ezrahite (Ps

89:18), and even directly by God himself (Isa 43:15). However, by failing to establish exegetically how holiness properly belongs to the relational position of God in his majesty eternally or how the present and enduring Lordship of Christ is acknowledged among those sanctified by him (e.g. 1 Cor 1:2) Webster does not provide warrant for why his interpretation of economic holiness as a relational attribute should be preferred over other readings. It is possible to have sympathy for Webster's aims and intentions yet identify his lack of rigor in executing them.

The paucity of exegetical evidence provided by Webster for his conclusions results in a certain vagueness in the precise manner in which divine economic holiness is constituted. For example, if economic holiness is equated with majesty in relationship does this entail a necessary overlap with divine lordship? To what extent would the two concepts be synonymous? If Webster did envisage that holiness might be at least informed by lordship, how does the uniqueness of the cruciocentric gospel of Christ orient a proper understanding of majesty away from purely temporal definitions? Such concepts are obliquely referred to by Webster, and indeed he does so in a manner that could be affirmed by just about any believer, but his language and analysis lack the necessary detail that would mark his as a preferred systematic interpretation of the topic. The extent to which others such as Gunton or Jenson were able to support their perspectives through exegesis and engagement with the dogmatic tradition means that Webster's thesis struggles

to achieve the same level of persuasiveness, even if his contributions are intriguing and attractive.

Webster's final observations in this section regarding the distinction of divine holiness and aseity are also worthy of consideration. Webster wishes to guard the holiness of God as a particular perfection rather than just a description of God's character and action. He maintains the distinction between divine aseity as expressing the relations proper between the persons of the Trinity and the inseity of God in his approach towards humanity in the economy<sup>237</sup> He observes that maintaining this distinction it is possible that the concept of holiness may collapse back into meaningless abstraction. While such a statement might be warranted, again Webster's lack of exegetical evidence and precision in his terms of reference means that it is difficult to maintain the distinction. Webster seems concerned to maintain a distinction between self-dependency and relational identity, but in light of his concepts of aseity as founded on Trinitarian identity and inseity as the turning of this eternal identity towards humanity it may not be as possible to maintain a hard distinction if Webster is to be faithful to his own method. Once again, because Webster does not provide exegetical support for his position his maintenance of a distinction between divine self-determined ontology and relational orientation are merely asserted rather than proven.

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 43.

In summary, Webster seeks to orient divine holiness with respect to the economic Trinity as fundamentally a holiness of relation. In other words, holiness is to be understood as the character of holiness by which God orients himself in his majesty towards creation as creator, redeemer, and purifier. As has been demonstrated, Webster's failure to conform to his own theological methods regarding employment of an exegetical dogmatic results in his perspective being one that is asserted rather than demonstrated. The scope of his terms, while broadly conforming to orthodox definitions, lack clarity and precision which means that there is insufficient warrant to demonstrate why his systematic framework should be preferred or whether his broader vision for theology as an activity of the church is sufficient to address the range of doctrinal challenges.

### **iii. In Our Midst (Relational)**

In the previous two sections Webster has outlined his thesis of divine holiness as a relational attribute as applied to God in his inner relations as Father, Son and Spirit (immanent Trinity) and in his majestic presence and action towards the world (economic Trinity). In the final part of Webster's definition, divine holiness is located in the fellowship-creating presence of God as Trinity, which is a unique contribution of Webster to discussions of the doctrine. According to his

theological framework this will act as the nexus by which the immanent and economic aspects of holiness achieve unity.

Webster lastly considers God as “the Holy One in our midst”, thus locating holiness as a divine mode of relation in that it is “the origin, manner and goal of the relation in which God stands to his creation.”<sup>238</sup> He perceives divine holiness as oriented towards a distinct telos in the establishment and maintenance of ongoing fellowship with humanity by and with God. In advancing such a definition, Webster wishes to ensure that holiness not become entirely subjective, as discussions of the attributes grounded in frameworks such as the absolute dependence of Schleiermacher can easily turn speculative and experiential. Relying on his earlier observations, Webster reinforces that the Holy God is to be found in the Trinitarian revelation of the gospel. Humanity does not turn towards God before God in his holiness has turned towards us.<sup>239</sup>

Webster stresses that divine holiness must, if it is to reflect the trinitarian character, must be grounded in more than just the transcendence of traditional understanding. To overemphasise divine transcendence would negate the possibility of true fellowship except as a matter of analogy. Rather, God’s holiness must consist of

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

his divine character which has been directed towards his redeemed people, and therefore, encompasses transcendence and the attitude of divine condescension.

So then:

The holiness of God is not to be identified simply as that which distances God from us; rather, God is holy precisely as the one who in majesty and freedom and sovereign power bends down to us in mercy.<sup>240</sup>

In other words, the holiness of God reduces the relational gap to enable fellowship with humanity. God is no longer a transcendent reality but the Holy One “in the midst” of his people (Hos 11:9; Isa 12:6). Rather than a negation of the holy character or necessitating creation to receive only part of the full divine revelation, holiness is the particular mode by which God presents his fullness to the world. It is at this point that the relational dynamic as the nexus between the holiness of the immanent and economic Trinity in Webster’s becomes realised. In the desire for a relational telos the God who is holy in his triune being acted decisively in the works of the incarnate Son thus establishing a relational orientation for the community of faith as they are drawn by the ongoing presence of the Spirit to reflect on the God in Trinity who has acted and continues to act for the salvation of humanity.

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

Similar to others in the Reformed tradition, the history of this salvation for Webster cannot be understood without reference to the narrative concept of “covenant”. Webster highlights the history of this holy condescension in the experience of the redeemed community being drawn into covenant fellowship with the holy God. The experience of Israel was of a people whose encounter with their creator in the experience of redemption was for the purpose of being possessed by God for fellowship defined by his holy character (e.g. Lev 19:2). Such conformity to the holy character of God in relationship by the redeemed community is reinforced in the New Testament (e.g. 1 Pet 1:15). In fact, Webster contends that divine holiness is itself the foundation for the covenant-creating activity of God:

This unbreakable link between holiness and covenant is crucial, because it articulates how God’s holiness is not an abstract and oppositional attribute but a relational one, the ground of the free and merciful relation of the righteous God to his people.<sup>241</sup>

The history of a covenant people as they encounter the God who is holy reveals that existence is therefore not divided up into the holy sacred and the unholy profane, but the one who is truly holy inserting his holy presence in among those who will be called by covenant to engage in a holy act of fellowship. Such a theme is possible to determine from the earliest biblical references to the covenant relationship between God and the redeemed nation. The injunction to Moses to

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 46.

remove his sandals as an acknowledgement that the ground on which he stood was “holy” (Exo 3:5) did not derive from the nature of the ground itself but because it was the relational space on which God had determined to conduct covenant business. The holiness of the Sabbath day for Israel (Exo 20:8-11) was linked directly to the economy of creation and the orientation of God towards holy rest that should be mirrored in the life of his redeemed people. Liturgical garments (Exo 28:2), anointing oil (Exo 30:25), food (Lev 6:16-18) and so forth are deemed “holy” not because of their innate character or origin but because they conform to the relational matrix established by God through which he enacts fellowship with his people. Similarly, the profaning of holy objects (Lev 19:8) or the name of God by the worship of idols (Lev 20:3) is effected because of human rejection of the means and signs by which the Holy God is to be known and by which he has commanded the relationship to proceed.

For Webster, the fact that the triune God is primarily covenant-creating means that any definition of divine holiness that rests primarily upon a moral framework is misdirected. He is critical primarily of Kantian frameworks that orient understanding towards abstract ethical absolutes instead of the divine essence as the source of holiness.<sup>242</sup> While Webster does not deny that divine holiness has moral implications, to define God as holy with reference to a moral otherness

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

would undercut the possibility of free relationship between Creator and creation.

Webster argues otherwise:

Holiness is not the antithesis of relation – it does not drive God from the unholy and lock God into absolute pure separateness. Rather, God’s holiness is the quality of God’s relation to that which is unholy; as the Holy One, God is the one who does not simply remain in separation but comes to his people and purifies them, making them into his own possession.<sup>243</sup>

The unholiness or impurity of sinful humanity, therefore, does not undermine or pollute the divine holiness extended in covenant. Rather, the redemption from sin achieved by divine act judges and overcomes the power of sin to thwart God’s relational desires. Humanity sees instead the determination of God to place himself in the midst of unholy humanity for the purpose of relationship which then transforms their identity towards God’s purposes. This relational posture of God is a condescension to fallen humanity without being a concession of God’s holy essence. As will be shown in the subsequent chapter such relational possibility does not eliminate the necessity for moral and behavioural renewal in both the redeemed community generally and the individual in particular, but that such modifications will proceed as a necessary consequence from the establishment and maintenance of holy fellowship with and by God rather than as a pre-established

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 47.

condition of conformity to an impersonal moral absolute that must be achieved prior to the commencement of that fellowship.

Webster grounds this relational view of divine holiness in the nature of the Trinity, who he has already established as holy in being and act. It is the fact that this God is known as Father, Son, and Spirit in his works that prevents discussions of divine holiness to revert to abstract principles. Webster stresses that it is not just that God has acted but that he has acted with the aim of establishing covenant through his nature as Trinity that has identified him as the Holy One:

Thus as Father, God is the one who wills and purposes from all eternity the separation of humankind as a holy people, destined for fellowship with himself. As Son, God is the one who achieves this separation of humankind by rescuing humanity from its pollution and bondage to unholiness. As Spirit, God is the one who completes or perfects that separation by sanctifying humankind and drawing it into righteous fellowship with the holy God. Only such a Trinitarian account of the holiness of God can do real justice to the character of divine holiness in its relational character as that which elects, separates and purifies.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 48.

Webster grounds his understanding here in references within Second Isaiah to the Holy God as Redeemer and Saviour. The divine covenant commitment to Israel is realised as God the Holy Redeemer enables his people to overcome fear as they face their enemies (Isa 41:14). Interestingly, as the details of this promise of God are expanded Israel's fulfilment of their transformed purpose results not only in the overcoming of the enemies who threaten them but that this result will lead Israel to a new relational state of peace as they "rejoice in the Lord and glory in the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 41:16). It is surprising that Webster does not explicitly connect the holy redemption and fellowship in advancing his thesis at this point and while it is possible that this informs his argument it is not possible to explicitly determine this with absolute certainty. The presence of the Holy One the Saviour with Israel ensures the progress of the covenant people through trials of judgment and purification to receive their promised inheritance (Isa 43:3). The Holy Redeemer is also the source of knowledge for righteous living which, had it been followed faithfully, would have resulted in unbroken fellowship (Isa 48:17). The election of the covenant people by the Redeemer and Holy One transforms them from despised to desired in the eyes of the rulers of the world who witness their exaltation (Isa 49:7). While this theme is an important one and Webster does well to recognise it, he does not subsequently ground this theme Christologically and so the intention of tying the promise of holy redemption in Isaiah's context to the trinitarian economy of the New Testament remains only partially realised. Nevertheless, Webster's overall contention is the holiness of God not only brings

together immanent reality and economic action but extends it outwards to humanity in acts of sanctification received by humanity through the bonds of covenant.<sup>245</sup>

For God to be holy, in other words, means that he sanctifies those with whom he has fellowship and destroys the evil which stands against the divine intentions for relationship. Unholiness, or that which is against the divine purpose, is also of a fundamentally relational nature as it works against the divine will by directing the creature to seek identity outside of God's relational intentions.<sup>246</sup> The process of sanctification, therefore, is not primarily to correct a moral or ritual deficit but instead to maximise the flourishing of humanity which has been called to a new relational order. To this end, Webster proposes that divine holiness has operationally positive and negative aspects. As to the former he states:

As Father, Son and Spirit, God is the Holy One in our midst, establishing, maintaining and perfecting righteous fellowship with the people of God. This

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<sup>245</sup> A recent study of divine holiness and transcendence in the Old Testament by Durand lends support to this interpretation. Durant proposes that divine holiness should not be equated with a transcendent reality that denies the relation of God to creation, but instead that the transcendent God that is revealed is himself the grounds for relationship that is achieved through the framework of election and covenant. See Emmanuel Durand, "God's Holiness: A Reappraisal of Transcendence", *MT* 34/3 (2018), 419-433.

<sup>246</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 48-49.

is what might be termed ‘positive’ divine holiness – holiness in its sanctifying aspect.<sup>247</sup>

God is therefore proactive in the progress of holy fellowship. The maintenance of the relationship will not depend solely on humanity’s efforts, but rather God will continue to act in sanctification for the benefit of holy fellowship. With respect to the negative:

God’s negative holiness is the destructive energy of God’s positive holiness; it is the holiness of the triune God who – precisely because he wills to sustain the creature – must obliterate everything which thwarts the creature’s life with God. God’s holiness destroys wickedness for the same reason that we human being destroy disease: because it attacks the creature’s flourishing and is opposed to our well-being.<sup>248</sup>

The Holy God therefore facilitates ongoing relationship through a process of perfection of the covenant people and destroying the obstacles to the growth of that fellowship.

As with previous sections, however, these propositions by Webster lack particular exegetical support and are rather general in nature. For example, the identity of negative holiness as applicable divine judgment on the Church might have been

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 50.

considered with respect to Jesus' declaration that the repentance of the people of Ninevah at the message of judgment should be a warning to all (Lk 11:32) while the declaration that the Father has given the Son the authority to judge all based on the response to hearing his message (Jn 5:24-27) reveals that the risen Christ is to be Lord and Judge of the Church. Thus, Webster's exegetical warrant for how God enacts holiness in either positive or negative aspects remains largely undefined, although these aspects will receive some attention in later sections which will be examined in the subsequent chapter of the current study.

From his views on positive and negative holiness in the establishment and maintaining of covenant fellowship, Webster then attempts to connect divine holiness with the attitude of jealousy. God's jealousy for his people is defined as his "willed energy" not to have humanity determine the manner by which they will exist apart from God. The holy God is not merely jealous for himself, but for the well-being of the creatures which he calls to himself.<sup>249</sup> Webster acknowledges the self-designation of God as jealous in passages such as Exodus 20:5 and Ezekiel 39:25.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

This section of Webster's exposition of the holiness of God contains numerous laudable aspects. His attempt to frame a dogmatic account of divine holiness according to his proposed threefold framework for systematics becomes realised. In drawing attention to the relational aspects of holiness Webster presents a new paradigm for how the holiness of the immanent and economic Trinity may find cohesion in a united systematic. He attempts to achieve this by expounding the relational telos of the gospel of Christ through the concept of covenant fulfilment. The holiness of the divine being was, in other words, never intended to remain a transcendent ideal or a characteristic of the enactment of revelation or reconciliation but was always directed towards a relational reality where God the Holy One would achieve true fellowship with humanity as a unique expression of his holiness. As has been shown Webster does provide some exegetical and theological warrant for his thesis in his use of Scripture as set out in his theological method.

Nevertheless, similar to previous sections, it is possible to identify weaknesses and omissions in Webster's examination of the relational aspect of divine holiness. As noted elsewhere, Webster's desire for an exegetical systematic is only partially realised in this section. While the biblical texts he does draw from do support the contention that divine holiness contains a relational aspect the details regarding the shape of this holy relationship are largely absent from this analysis. Little attention is given to divine enactment of relational possibility within particular spaces, such

as his establishment of fellowship with Israel at the holy mountain (Exo 19:23), cultic spaces (Exo 23:33-34), or the dwelling places of the covenant people (Deut 24:14). Nor is there direct consideration as to how these spaces of fellowship are fulfilled in the adoption of Jerusalem as the space in which the Holy God determines to enact his desire for fellowship with his people (Ps 48:1-2; Isa 27:13; Joe 2:1; Zech 8:3). Attention to these themes would have demonstrated support for Webster's main thesis.

Likewise, Webster's attempt to connect the enactment of holy fellowship to the theme of covenant presents several identifiable problems. Key biblical texts that link the holy character of God with the enactment of covenant (e.g. Ps 111:9) or that the covenant relationship possesses a holy character (e.g. Dan 11:28-30; Lk 1:72) are not given attention. Moreover, Webster's desire for holy relationship understood within covenant context should have prompted further reflection through a Christological framework, but such analysis is notably absent. Christ as the incarnate Son presents to the world as the Holy One who by his presence demands a response, even if one of fear that power is truly in his hands (Lk 4:32). As the one sanctified and sent by God into the world (Jn 10:36) Jesus is the one who represents the reality of the Father to the world so that humanity may relate properly to him. The incarnation of the Son transforms the relational spaces where God may be encountered away from Jerusalem or other "holy" sites to be relocated in the embodied Truth in the power of the Spirit (Jn 4:20-24). The absence of

consideration how covenantal fellowship will be shifted as the salvation history shifts from old to new covenant means that Webster attempts to construct a gospel-directed systematic without a framework of biblical theology.

The jealousy of God appears to be yet another underdeveloped factor in Webster's systematic and contains a number of difficulties. While the jealousy of God may be expressed in willed energy for divine authority and against creaturely determination of the fellowship relationship (e.g. Zec 8:1-3) this again appears to be an argument of assumption rather than exegesis. No attention is given to the main Scriptural context of divine jealousy, which is as a reaction against idolatry and explicit rejection of covenant (e.g. Exo 34:14; Jos 24:19-20) rather than an attempt to navigate the covenant under other terms. Jealousy is also used to express God's concern for the perception of his own name among the nations and as an excuse to return blessings to a covenant people in rebellion (Joe 2:16-19). It appears from even a brief overview of divine jealousy in Scripture that the concept encompasses a range much broader than Webster admits. Moreover, Webster's statement that, "God's jealousy is his holiness in his work of restoration and mercy, as we are cleansed by the blood of Jesus (1 Jn 1:7) and sanctified by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit (Tit 3:5)" can be seen as purely speculative – neither of the verses referred to (or their immediate context) connect the restorative work of Christ to either divine jealousy or holiness. A theological relationship between divine holiness and jealousy, determining the precise nature of

that relationship would require a more sustained treatment than the one offered by Webster here.<sup>250</sup>

### c. Evaluating Webster's Theology of the Holiness of God

The current chapter has attempted an examination of John Webster's theology of the holiness of God in his monograph *Holiness* with particular reference to his proposed systematic framework. It commenced with a brief analysis of his concept of theology as an exercise of holy reason done in the presence of God with the aim of enabling the confession of the name of the Holy Trinity among the holy people of God. Webster provides a threefold definition of the holiness of God – that he is holy in the immanence of inner Trinitarian relations, in his economic acts of revelation and salvation, and in his act of establishing and maintaining holy fellowship with humanity as “God the holy one in our midst”. The current chapter has sought to determine to what extent his account could be determined as coherent according to the dogmatic and exegetical standards which Webster himself advanced.

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<sup>250</sup> It should be noted that a more recent study outlined the relationship between divine holiness and jealousy as a mode of action deriving from and expressing that holiness. See Gerard Nissim Amzallag, “Furnace Remelting as the Expression of YHWH's Holiness: Evidence from the Meaning of *qannā* (קנא) in the Divine Context”, *JBL* 134/2 (2015): 233-252.

As has been demonstrated, an analysis of Webster's theology of divine holiness revealed that several aspects of Webster's systematics warrant critique. His consideration of this topic does not appear to meet the robust theological standards he has demanded of the practice of systematics that he has argued as necessary in his dogmatic prolegomena on theological theology. Yet, at the same time, his desire to present a unified theology of divine holiness to bring together understandings of the attribute as applicable to the immanent and economic Trinity appears to have some merit and would in fact be desirable to unite acknowledgement of the holiness of the one true God in being and act. How then shall the coherence of Webster's theology of divine holiness be determined?

To answer this question it will be necessary to acknowledge a distinction between formal and material coherence. Formal coherence refers to the extent that a position accords with the aims and pattern advanced as necessary for the thesis to achieve its aim. With respect to systematics, this involves the theological locus of centrality being maintained and theological formulae conforming to the expected shape. In contrast, material coherence refers to whether the substance of the argument accords with the thesis being advanced. In systematics this would be seen in the construction of theological propositions as accurately and robustly deriving from the dogmatic standards set. It should be recognised that coherence in this instance is not synonymous with consistency – a particular systematic might be consistent in the propositions that it advances but yet not have coherence through

non-conformity to primary principles or failing to prove sufficient warrant exists for those propositions. The question must then be asked as to whether Webster's theology of divine holiness achieves formal and material coherence.

This study concludes that Webster's theology of divine holiness does demonstrate a state of formal coherence. Webster maintains a dogmatic centred on the triune being of God rather than on abstract metaphysical or ethical principles and concerns. The threefold formula that he proposes, and particularly the thesis of divine holiness as the nexus between the holiness of the immanent and economic Trinity, conforms to the pattern that he had set out in his theological prolegomena. The exposition of his theological formula maintained his self-determined appropriate posture as reflecting holy reasoning on the self-revelation of God in Scripture as understood by the Church, and as such was reflected in his manner of engaging with Scripture and with a range of theological perspectives. From this it is possible to determine that Webster's theology of the holiness of God does demonstrate formal coherence.

However, a close examination of Webster's arguments leads this study to conclude that the material coherence of his theology of divine holiness has not demonstrated material coherence to the extent that uncritical support can be given. In this work Webster disappointingly does not sufficiently adhere to the theological standards

which he proposed were necessary for a robust systematic, particularly with respect to deriving theological principles directly from exegesis of Scripture as the revelation of God. While Webster does refer to texts of Scripture to support his arguments in a way that largely accords with sound exegetical principles, his analysis passes over much of the witness in the text so that his precise view on how many of the biblical themes regarding divine holiness operate within his systematic must merely be inferred rather than clearly understood. His lack of Christology or a framework of biblical theology is a particular weakness, particularly given his argument about the centrality of covenant relationship to an understanding of holy fellowship.<sup>251</sup> Webster perhaps intended to deliberately keep his systematic treatment brief and easily digestible for the reader, but this results in him not truly achieving the exegetical theology that he had explicitly stated was his preferred method and as such his account of divine holiness lacks precision at various key points. His engagement with the perspectives of the Church fare somewhat better and Webster is to be applauded for critically engaging with dogmatic approaches both inside and outside his own theological tradition. However, his lack of exegetical theology also becomes a handicap at this point as it is unclear why in certain instances his preference for certain dogmatic perspectives might be warranted except that they seem to agree with his own theses. As was noted in the

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<sup>251</sup> Webster would later address some of these systematic issues in “Christology, Theology, Economy: The Place of Christology In Systematic Theology”, in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology Volume I – God and the Works of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 43-58.

analysis, exegetical evidence for Webster's theological points may have been sourced to provide additional warrant for the conclusions drawn but the failure to expand on these points suggests that Webster assumed a sympathetic reading of his proposals instead of explicitly demonstrating their validity. Vosloo notes that as Webster's methodology is sceptical regarding conversational and comparativist theologies it would hold little appeal for those inclined to follow more postmodern systematic approaches.<sup>252</sup> The dogmatic methodology employed might be to correspond more closely to the interrelation between the authoritative witness of Scripture as read along with the interpretative history of the Church that Webster had shifted more clearly towards in his later works, and thus gaps in explicit exegetical support for his premises and conclusions could possibly be excused. However, given that Webster had prefaced this work as one of exegetical theology and that Scripture would remain the primary authoritative witness for the task of theology even in his later works, it would be expected that a revised treatment of the topic by Webster would have included more fulsome exegetical support (as he so often required of others). It therefore must be concluded that Webster's

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<sup>252</sup> Robert Vosloo, "Holiness", *Interpretation* (2005): 438-439. A similar critique is made by Dreyer: "For those looking to correct anthropocentric strains in theology, *Holiness* provides a reorientation toward God's sovereignty. But it will not appeal to theologians who have a more positive assessment of theology's engagement with contemporary thought. Webster's utter confidence in his ability to distinguish the true God from 'the God of human invention' belies theology's mandate to take seriously the complexity and pluralism of the human encounter with God." Elizabeth A. Dreyer, "Holiness", *Theological Studies* (2005): 501.

theology of divine holiness does not sufficiently demonstrate material coherence according to the dogmatic standards under which he typically operated.

#### **d. Conclusion**

The present chapter engaged in a critical examination of John Webster's theology of the holiness of God to determine whether his dogmatic demonstrated adequate coherence according to the principles of systematics he has proposed elsewhere. It concludes that Webster's theology of divine holiness demonstrates formal coherence in adhering to the desired shape and aims of his theological method but does not demonstrate adequate material coherence to be considered sufficiently robust dogmatically. It neglected to sufficiently employ his preferred exegetical theological method as an expression of holy reason in a way that adequately supports his premises or conclusions.

## CHAPTER SIX

### JOHN WEBSTER ON THE HOLINESS OF GOD IN THE CHURCH AND THE INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN

The previous chapters began a critical review of the doctrine of the holiness of God advanced by John Webster. Chapter Three presented an outline of the foundational principles of Webster's theological method, focusing particularly on his advocacy of a truly "theological theology" and his view of Scripture as an authoritative and authenticated self-communication of God. Chapter Four discussed Webster's position on divine aseity and the attributes within the context of historical and contemporary debates regarding these doctrines within systematics as a necessary prologue to consideration of his doctrine of divine holiness in particular. A critical examination of this concept was conducted in Chapter Five which focused on the position espoused in Webster's monograph *Holiness*. His argument for a threefold formula of divine holiness – that it is located in the Triune identity of God, in his works of revelation and reconciliation, and in his fellowshiping presence as "God the Holy One in our midst" – was reviewed to determine to what extent Webster presented a coherent position according to the theological principles and methods that he had proposed. It concluded that, while Webster's doctrine of divine holiness displayed formal coherence in that it conformed to the priorities and systematic shape that he had advanced, it lacked

sufficient material coherence by failing to adequately employ the exegetical theology Webster had advocated as consistent with his position on the authority of Scripture. The lack of warrant for his statements results in his propositions lacking precision and thus present difficulties in determining whether his reading of the biblical data and engagement with other theological voices should be accepted over alternative perspectives, whether historic or modern.

For Webster, the holiness that the people of God possess is not merely a consequence or reproduction of divine holiness, but is instead an ongoing reality of the divine holy mode of relation through the economy as reflective of the nature of the immanent Trinity:

It is a fundamental rule of Christian theology that a doctrine of God which is *only* a doctrine of God is not a Christian doctrine of God. The task of articulating a Christian doctrine of God, because is it a doctrine of the Holy Trinity made known in free majesty in the economy of creation, reconciliation and perfection, is not finished when it has spoken of God in himself (*in se*); for God is essentially, to the depths of his triune being, God for us and God with us, the one whose mercy evokes the miracle of human fellowship with himself.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 53 (emphasis original).

Webster follows the example of Barth in expecting divine holiness to be witnessed in the holiness of the humanity with whom God has formed a covenant relationship. Human holiness entails being fit for service in the fellowship that God has established. In discussing the cultic requirements of the Torah, Barth states that Israel kept the Holiness Code not out of an effort to merit righteousness but from accepting the reality of the holy character of their God who had come among them. God's holiness could have destroyed them, but in acknowledging God's holy character they accepted the possibility of having fellowship with him.<sup>254</sup>

The present chapter will continue the analysis of Webster's doctrine of divine holiness as expounded in the *Holiness* monograph chapters which address the holiness of the Church and the individual Christian. The focus of the current study entails that a complete analysis of Webster's theology of the holiness of redeemed community and individual shall not be attempted but will instead be limited to an analysis of how the holiness of God is particularly revealed within in these spheres.

#### **a. Holiness of God in the Church**

In considering the question of the Holy God in the Church, Webster's first concern is that an appropriate ecclesiology not be overly reliant on forms of social

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<sup>254</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 364-365.

trinitarianism espoused by those such as Moltmann which seeks to replicate the inner relations of the divine being in the activity of the Church. His primary critiques centre both on the loss of appropriate reverence that should belong to God alone and that this approach improperly directs the Church towards the role of a divine agent and so diminishes the passivity which is proper to its standing before God. An alternate model of communal holiness to which Webster's critiques may also apply was advanced by Neil Ormerod, who argues not just for an imitation of inner-Trinitarian relations but for a direct metaphysical participation in those relations by the Church. "The biblical injunction, 'Be holy as I am holy' functions as a call to an imitative relationship with the divine nature, taking the divine holiness as an exemplar of what human holiness consists. Human holiness is therefore a created and imitative participation in the divine nature."<sup>255</sup> The Church, for Webster, is not an active sharer in the divine presence but rather testifies to the reality that God shares his presence with humanity through an attitude of grace.<sup>256</sup>

Rather than acting as a direct participant in the divine nature, Webster argues that the holiness of the Church is marked as an "alien sanctity", not possessing holiness in and of itself but as a reflection of the Holy God with which the Church is in

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<sup>255</sup> Neil Ormerod, "The Metaphysics of Holiness: Created Participation in the Divine Nature", *ITQ* 79/1: 75.

<sup>256</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 54-55.

communion. If the Church is to be described as holy, it will be as a testimony to the holiness of the God that is with them rather than of a fully transformed communal nature. As Webster states:

The Church is holy; but it is holy, not by virtue of some ontological participation in the divine holiness, but by virtue of its calling by God, its reception of the divine benefits, and its obedience of faith.<sup>257</sup>

According to this understanding, the Church acts as the location or sphere in which God the Holy one in our midst acts and creates fellowship thus displaying his holiness. God is holy not only in that he is the one who initiates the possibility of fellowship but also in how this fellowship is sustained.

Webster therefore argues that an understanding of the holiness of the Church will remain defined operationally within the broader doctrine of the holiness of God. To this end he advances the following proposition:

The Holiness of the Church is grounded in the work of the Holy Trinity in electing, reconciling and perfecting a people to become God's covenant partners and the fellowship of the saints.

Within this description the threefold pattern of divine holiness examined in the previous section can be identified – God himself as Trinity acts to establish and

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 57.

maintain a relational reality. Such a view is in keeping with Barth, who held that God is present in the midst of his people through the person of the Holy Spirit, who in turn has prepared humanity to receive this presence. This is not an abstract presence, but one located within the holy community characterised by true faith. This temporal presence of the Spirit is what defines the Church – those who are gathered for service and to sit under Scripture. The Church is thus the earthly form of the heavenly reality that reconciliation has taken place in and through Jesus.<sup>258</sup> Webster is demonstrating consistency in moving from his systematic of holiness to his ecclesiology. The Holy Trinity in acting for redemption and reconciliation will set the terms by which communal holiness will be defined:

God is not merely the Church's initial cause nor its remote end; rather the Church is because God is. The Church is holy because God is holy.<sup>259</sup>

If any holiness is then observable in the life of the church it is a reflection on the divine character who is truly holy. It must then be considered in what particular manner holiness is displayed in the experience of divine fellowship in the Church and how this testifies to the nature of divine holiness.

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<sup>258</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 160.

<sup>259</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 58.

Webster commences by proposing that divine holiness in the Church is perceived in the act of election that flows from the eternal decision and person of the Father.

He draws on the words of Ephesians 1:3-4 regarding election to propose:

Viewed in the context of the overall scope of the first chapter of the letter, this statement in these early verses can be seen as conveying a double affirmation: that the ground of holiness is election and that the goal of election is holiness. If there exists a human realm of holiness, if holiness has an enduring human and social form, then that form is to be traced to its generative source in the electing activity of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, condensed into the single word: *exlexato* – he chose.<sup>260</sup>

The first part of that “double affirmation” is the principle concern of the current analysis. If the holiness of the Church is grounded in divine election, then election acts as a sphere of holy engagement by God with the world. God is not merely holy *as* he elects but *by* his election of the Church to be a sanctified people.

Webster notes, but does not directly exegete, two further New Testament references to support this assertion – firstly to Paul’s description of the Church as “God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved” (Col 3:12) and secondly to Peter’s greetings to the various churches as those “who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit [εἰς

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 59.

ἀγασμῶ πνεύματος]” (1 Pet. 1:2). Webster draws on Calvin’s work on election and explicitly connects it to his systematic of holiness. He continues:

The Church’s holiness is the result of the divine decision, not of any human acts of separating a ‘pure’ group from an ‘impure’...Only God is properly holy; only God may elect the Church; only an elect Church is sanctified. The Church’s holiness is thus grounded in the election of God the Father.<sup>261</sup>

This relationship between election and divine holiness represents perhaps the place where Webster most closely adheres to the exegetical systematic method that he advocated in his introduction so far. Webster’s use of numerous New Testament sources to support his premises appears coherent, as does his connection of exegesis to established Reformed position. A more thorough treatment may have anchored this point more explicitly in biblical theology and the realisation of the election of Israel in the Church, although reading Webster sympathetically in the context of his broader work would indicate that such considerations had informed his theology at this point.

Webster declares that the holy character of the church “is established in the reconciling work of the Son, who cleansed the Church that it might be holy.”<sup>262</sup> He again engages in an exegetical dogmatic focusing on the work of Christ primarily in

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

Ephesians, to demonstrate how the act of election by the Father is enacted in the salvific redemption achieved by the Son. God is holy, therefore, not only in the reality of his election to achieve sanctification but in the works of redemption that have brought that election to reality. God is holy *by* the salvific act of the Son through which the Church fulfils their elect calling to become holy. Again, Webster refers back to the commentary work of Calvin on baptism in Ephesians 5:26 as achieving both a “passive sanctification” of separation of the Church from the world and an “active sanctification” of the enactment of holy lives to God’s glory.<sup>263</sup> Webster has warrant for noting the holy nature of redemption by the Son in the passages cited, but yet this section appears somewhat underdeveloped as it fails to consider passages that suggest other dimensions are at play (for example, the implication of the death of Christ and the joining in that death of the Baptized to produce new life (Rom 6:1-14) as grounded in the eternal life of God as Holy Trinity). Further support could be found in the explicit connection in 2 Timothy 1:8-10 between the holy calling [κλήσει ἁγία] of God, eternally purposed through the Son as finally achieved through the works of Christ Jesus.

Finally, Webster presents the holiness of God as evident in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Since the Church has been elected and redeemed for the purpose of holiness, as he had demonstrated, it must retain its holy identity solely on the

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 61.

basis of divine election being maintained by the ongoing reconciling work of the Spirit. Drawing on the description of the work of the Spirit in Ephesians 2, he proposes:

The work of the Spirit is to ‘perfect’, that is, to bring to completion or full realization the reality which is willed in election and established in reconciliation. The Spirit is God himself consummating the design of reconciliation, whose goal is that there should be covenant fellowship between himself and the creatures whom he has made and redeemed by drawing them into relation with himself.<sup>264</sup>

The holiness of God in the activity of the Spirit, therefore, is primarily teleological. The presence of and ongoing transformation by the Spirit is the means by which God continues to realise the goal of holy fellowship with the redeemed community. While the particulars of the sanctifying activity of the Spirit in the Church are beyond the scope of the current study, it can be easily acknowledged that the activity of the Spirit is properly seen in sanctifying the redeemed community for divine fellowship. However, Webster in his analysis neglects to fully consider the presence of the Spirit as the fulfilment of communal fellowship with God rather than only the means of perfection. The removal of the Holy Spirit is equated by the psalmist with being cast out from the direct presence of God (Ps 51:11). Jesus instructed his disciples that the Spirit would not only be the source of “living

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

water” but would replace his presence with them after his glorification (Jn 7:38-39). The coming of the Holy Spirit is not only to perfect divine fellowship within the Church but is also the means by which that fellowship is expanded through the mission of the Church (Act 1:8). Once again, therefore, while Webster correctly identifies an aspect of the operation of the Spirit that corresponds to his systematic his inattention to alternative operations means that it is difficult to determine whether his dogmatic emphasis is to be preferred in this instance.

Webster concludes by returning to the theme of the holiness possessed by the Church as an “alien sanctity”, having its foundation in the gracious electing and reconciling character of God in his triune being.<sup>265</sup> The spiritual presence of the Holy God with the Church ensures the enduring holy character of that redeemed community. The appropriate posture of this community will be in recognising the reception by grace of that which they do not of their own nature possess but which resides with them.

There is, accordingly, a proper passivity to the being of the Church, for *faith* – that is, recognition and assent and trust in the word and work of God – and not *boasting* – that is, self-grounded, proud competence – is the fundamental act of the Church’s existence. From this ontological rule about the holy Church’s constitution there follows a further rule about the action of the holy

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

Church: all the actus of the holy Church must demonstrate a reference to the work of the One who alone is holy: the electing Father who reconciles in the Son and perfects in the Spirit.<sup>266</sup>

The manifestations of holy identity in the Church, whether in confession or action, will therefore only complete their calling as “holy” as they direct attention to the Holy One who is in the midst of his people. Once again, Webster’s exegetical systematic appears coherent to the extent to which it is taken but may have been strengthened by further support. The teaching of Jesus regarding the ongoing sanctifying work of the Spirit for the church for faith and mission in John 15-17, for example could have provided additional dimensions for Webster to have explored. Similarly, the limitation of exegetical dialogue to Calvin results in clarity for Webster’s position but leaves unresolved implications for reading alternate perspectives, such as Barth’s view on Christ and election, which may result from Webster’s insights.

#### **b. Holiness of God in the Christian Individual**

In addition to divine holiness being actualised in fellowship with the Church collectively, Webster proposes a mode of that holiness as applied in the individual Christian as a consequence of the alien sanctity of the Church. He is careful to

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 63.

stress that this individual dimension to divine holiness should not be divorced or elevated above the communal dimensions outlined previously but that the individual resides properly within the communal.<sup>267</sup> It may be expected, therefore, that the holiness of God that Webster views as operative in the life of the individual will derive consistently from the communal mode of holy relations that was discussed in the prior section.

Regarding the holy life of the individual, Webster offers the following definition:

The sanctification of the Christian is the work of the Holy Trinity in which the reconciled sinner is renewed for the active life of holy fellowship with God.<sup>268</sup>

Webster connects the sanctifying operations of the triune being in the individual to the economy of election he had outlined in previous sections. His intention is to demonstrate that divine election is not located simply in an abstract redeemed communal identity or magisterium but is consistently operative down to the individual level.

Our thinking about sanctification would be disorderly if we were to suggest that, although in the matter of reconciliation we have to talk of a divine determination, when we move to speak of human holiness we are required to

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 79.

shift to talk of our own agency, perhaps co-operating with God, perhaps rendering God his due in return for the gift of salvation. But, if we are elected to holiness, then we have been extracted from the sphere of human autonomy; the Christian's holiness does not stem from the Christian's decision.<sup>269</sup>

In other words, Webster seeks to maintain the authority and active direction of God from the salvation by Christ through to the ongoing sanctifying work of the Spirit. The holiness of God is on view not only in the general sphere but in the particulars of the participants in holy fellowship. God is not merely holy in our collective midst but *in the midst of each one of us*.<sup>270</sup>

Specifically, according to Webster, the sanctification of the individual Christian is the operation of the Son's work of reconciliation that derives from the work of redemption. As such, Webster appears to ground his understanding of personal sanctification in one of the main pillars of Reformed theology – individual justification by faith which would exclude the contributions of individual effort or improvement to redeemed status. But as he does so he also seeks to avoid a

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>270</sup> It should be noted here that Webster does not solely attribute individual holiness to the product of divine presence and action. The latter sections of this chapter of his monograph address the necessity of mortification and vivification of the flesh in accordance with the Reformers (88-92) in order for the true Christian life characterised by freedom, obedience, and love to be fulfilled (92-98). However, as these are the consequence of the holiness of God in relation to the individual rather than being proper to it consideration of this part of Webster's argument falls outside the scope of the current project.

reductionistic interpretation of this truth by drawing attention to two factors deriving from the holy nature of the Trinity.<sup>271</sup> First, Webster argues that a proper understanding of this doctrine should not result in a purely functional Christology which divorces the person of Christ from his acts of redemption. Whatever may be achieved by the actions of God, those actions remain fundamentally personal and so oriented towards relational outcomes. Second, Webster seeks to avoid a reductionistic understanding of the economy that subsumes the entire reconciling work of the Son within acts of justification. While retaining a central position for justification, he wishes to recognise that the eternal work of the Son in realising the kingdom of God as an eschatological reality through incarnation and resurrection presents a more comprehensive picture of reconciliation than could be adequately expressed solely by forensic language.

It is that mission in its full compass, and not any single phase within it, which constitutes the achievement of our sanctification; only in that full compass do we have the enactment of the ‘name’ of Jesus Christ in which we are made holy.<sup>272</sup>

The holiness of the individual therefore requires a mature and developed Christology that testifies to the one by whom relational holiness is actualised. Such a position prevents the possibility of individual holiness being reduced to being merely “separateness” from the world, but instead highlights the aim of

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 82.

justification being preparation for fellowship with God by locating the identity of the individual in Christ. While a full Christological analysis would naturally have been beyond the scope of Webster's project, the individual implication of the roles of Son and Spirit in realising holiness are revealing in their attestation towards what he views as central for the holiness of the divine being.

Webster commences by identifying the Son as the primary agent of individual holiness. He states:

Jesus Christ is the Holy One who makes holy...He does not only acquit, but in acquitting, he consecrates, renewing humankind's vocation to be holy before God.<sup>273</sup>

Webster supports this claim with reference to Christ as the Holy One (Mk 1:24) and as the one who the Father has consecrated as holy (Jn 10:36). He continues:

He sanctifies because as the one who assumes human nature he is in our place, and acts in our place, making us – not merely potentially, but actually – holy, consecrated to God. God make him our sanctification; to be a saint is to have one's holiness in Christ Jesus.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 82-83.

Webster is thus proposing a representative mode of sanctification. Humanity has the potential of sanctified existence because of identity in the incarnate Son who stands as the one who is truly holy before the Father.

The verses in their context that Webster cites in support of this proposition are not explicitly supportive of this mode of sanctification. It may be inferred that Webster here is drawing on the ἐν χριστῷ language in Ephesians that had formed his rationale regarding the role of election in sanctification, but this would require a generous and sympathetic reading. Moreover, Webster's language is imprecise in the extent to which this representative sanctification is realised – if Christ is the one who has achieved sanctification through union with human nature, does this imply that all who share in this human nature are somehow participants in this sanctification through Christ's representation or does this sanctification become actualised only through faith?<sup>275</sup> While he does not cite it directly, it appears likely

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<sup>275</sup> Calvin himself was clear that Spiritual renewal was not a benefit of a common grace to humanity, but it was the elect in Christ who were the beneficiaries of the activity of the Holy Spirit to initiate and confirm of faith: "The foundation of faith would be frail and unsteady if it rested on human wisdom; and therefore, as preaching is the instrument of faith, so the Holy Spirit makes preaching efficacious. But is it not the faith itself which is here said to be sealed by the Holy Spirit? If so, faith goes before the sealing. I answer, there are two operations of the Spirit in faith, corresponding to the two parts of which faith consists, as it enlightens, and as it establishes the mind. The commencement of faith is knowledge: the completion of it is a firm and steady conviction, which admits of no opposing doubt. Both, I have said, are the work of the Spirit." John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Calvin's Commentaries; vol 21 of 23; trans. Charles William Bingham. Edinburgh: Baker, 2009), 104.

that Webster's use of a Barthian view of election is shaping his perspective at this point.<sup>276</sup>

Webster subsequently argues that the holy sinner has attained new identity through being "in" the Spirit of God.

By the personal operation of the Spirit, that which God wills and accomplishes with sovereign freedom and effectiveness come to be the actual condition of the Christian's existence: no longer an abstract state of affairs but an objective reality which gathers the Christian into itself.<sup>277</sup>

The operation of the Spirit therefore is that which includes the individual Christian in the actions that God is freely accomplishing. The sovereignty and centrality of divine being and purpose is not compromised, nor does it become a stimulation for natural latent sanctified tendencies within human participants. The result is the divine Being In Act located individually in those who have confessed faith and who are now in the Spirit.

'Sanctification in the Spirit' means: it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And 'Christ lives in me' means: by the Spirit's power I am separated from

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<sup>276</sup> "[Jesus Christ] is not merely the Reconciler between God and man. First, He is Himself the reconciliation between them. And so He is not only the Elected. He is also Himself the Elector, and in the first instance His election must be understood as active." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2* (eds. G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 104-105.

<sup>277</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 83.

my self-caused self-destruction, and given a new holy self, enclosed by, and wholly referred to, the new Adam in whom I am and in whom I act.<sup>278</sup>

If the individual is holy, therefore, they attain that reality through the operation of the Spirit to reorient their identity to be located in Christ the truly Holy One. The relational aspect of individual sanctification in Webster's thought owes at least something to Barth's treatment of the topic in *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, where he posits the sanctified reality as an outworking of the believer's participation in and communion with Christ. Sonderegger summarises Barth's thought on this topic thus:

“In the end, we may say, I think, that sanctification, for Barth, is the impartation of Truth. In his Holy Spirit, Christ reveals himself as Truth, and that Truth sets us free. We are freed to accept, acknowledge and submit to that Truth, to receive that claim, laid upon us, and to respond with our own work, our act of obedience. Christ reveals the truth about ourselves, discloses our exaltation – he alone opens that door – and, in the event of the Spirit, we are freed to act like those whose truth and reality we are graced to see. The impartation of this Truth or Instruction is at once external to us – it is Christ's direction and claim and judgment – and internal to us – it is our seeing, embracing and responding to the Truth, the Truth for us. Sanctification is a

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 84.

Divine impartation and human act, an event, and a cognitive, rational determination.<sup>279</sup>

Consequently, the proper expression of the sanctified Christian is the pursuit of holy fellowship as prompted by faith. The believer acknowledges their true status as reconciled sinner, one who had previously found personal identity without reference to the Creator but who has now by the sacrificial death of Christ and the reconciling work of the Spirit been brought back into engagement with God and thus been set free for a life of obedience.<sup>280</sup> Webster draws on Calvin's advancement of the "double grace" of Christ that achieves reconciliation with God as Father and prompts purity of life.<sup>281</sup> As such, the most sanctified work and posture for the individual Christian is faith – a trust in the ongoing holy character and work of the God who has redeemed.

For, if *sola fide* is the bass note of Christian holiness, then the explication of that holiness requires an ontology of the human person, and consequently a psychology and an ethics, in which the being of the Christian is not made but given. To be, and therefore to be holy, is to be an implicate of the creative

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<sup>279</sup>Katherine Sonderegger, "Sanctification as Impartation in the Doctrine of Karl Barth", *ZDT* 18/3 (2002): 314.

<sup>280</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 84-85.

<sup>281</sup> "Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life." Calvin, *Institutes* III.xi.1.

and saving purposes of the triune God. Christian holiness is thus an aspect of the eschatological character of reconciled humanity. To be human in holy fellowship with God is to be granted one's being in the history of the triune God with us.<sup>282</sup>

The holy individual, therefore, is not characterised only by their present state but by where the God who is holy in them through Christ will bring them. Holy people do not set their own sanctification agenda – it belongs properly to the only one who is truly holy and who then bestows it on others.

Webster maintains that this trust in *sola fide* is not passive but active. The receipt of this new holy status by the individual directs them to act in accordance with their new communal status.

Holiness is indicative; but it is also imperative; indeed, it is imperative because it is the indicative holiness of the triune God whose work of sanctification is directed towards the renewal of the creature's active life of fellowship with him.<sup>283</sup>

Those who have been sanctified have no option but to live according to the holy relationship they have been drawn into. Their new holy character is to conform to the Holy One who fellowships with them.

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<sup>282</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 86-87.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

Elsewhere, Webster describes the Spirit not merely as an economic force, but rather as a “perfecting cause” which gives life and allows the creature to regain their intended purpose.<sup>284</sup> Such a re-orientation is taken by Webster to have ontological implications for those who have been reconciled. He states:

To be human in holy fellowship with God *is to be granted one’s being* in the history of the triune God with us. In that history, the old self-enclosed and polluted existence has been and is continually set aside, and *a new existence* opened up, a holy existence of fellowship with the Holy One.<sup>285</sup>

Thus, it is not merely a forensic or moral change of status that is achieved through the sanctification process, but a new foundation of being within the history of the divine economy and the new relational possibilities that have been opened up. To be a saint, therefore, is to be an entirely new creation oriented towards different priorities and possibilities. Webster summarises this new life as characterised by freedom, obedience and love – the freedom from all bondage to live out holy fellowship with God, obedience to the way of life God demands of those he has elected, and love for neighbour as a summons to fellowship in light of the reality of

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<sup>284</sup> Webster, *Confessing God*, 128.

<sup>285</sup> Webster, *Holiness*, 87 (emphasis mine).

what God has done.<sup>286</sup> A holy life, therefore, is a relational response to the free act of God by which he has established holy fellowship with us by being in our midst.

### **c. Evaluation of Webster's Theology of the Holiness of God in the Church and Individual Christian**

Having outlined the manner in which Webster continues to advocate for divine holiness as a relational attribute that is actualised in the reality of communal and individual fellowship it is then necessary to determine to what extent his work in these sections of his monograph represents a successful contribution to his overall thesis. Specifically, it must be determined whether his propositions exhibit both formal and material coherence.

The analysis of this chapter has determined that Webster's theology of the holiness of God in the Church and individual Christian demonstrate formal coherence with both his overall systematic methodology and the theology of the holiness of God examined in Chapter Four of this study. Knowledge of God as holy is recognised by Webster not in the abstract but in the presence of the self-determined God who has also determined to be God-for-us through the establishment of holy fellowship. The holiness of the Church and the individual Christian, therefore, are

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 92-98.

not distinct from the divine holiness but are instead an eschatological sanctity that properly speaks of the holiness of God himself. Communally, Webster interprets this holiness in the actions of the triune God in operation in election, reconciliation and perfection of a new redeemed people defined by the divine presence among them. Individually, God is holy in the action of preparing and sustaining the believer in the Spirit for a life of active fellowship and service to the Holy One. Consistent with his arguments in prior sections, Webster is committed to maintaining a systematic defined by a focus on the triune God in action. God is not merely the Holy One who condescends to engage in fellowship but is the one who *is* holy in communal and individual fellowship. His work at this point should be generally regarded as formally coherent.

However, as was observed in the previous chapter, it is questionable as to whether Webster has provided sufficient support for his theses that his overall position should be regarded as materially coherent. While Webster's engagement with Scripture and the works of theological forebears is both careful and engaging, the extent to which he engages with both appears narrow with the result that at certain points Webster neglects to provide sufficient exegetical warrant for why his perspectives should be preferred above alternate readings. As noted, a broader range of biblical and non-biblical sources, as well as relating his exegetical systematic to biblical theology, would have provided additional support for the holiness of God in the relational spheres for which Webster is advocating.

Whether Webster would have extended and clarified the defence of his position in subsequent systematic work is at this point a matter of conjecture, but as noted in the previous chapter Webster's later advocated systematic method suggests that both a broader range of biblical exegesis and historical systematics would have featured more prominently. As such it has not been demonstrated that there is sufficient warrant for regarding Webster's theology of the holiness of God in the Church and individual Christian presented in the *Holiness* monograph as having material coherence

#### **d. Conclusion**

The present chapter examined Webster's theology of the holiness of God in the Church and individual Christian in the *Holiness* monograph. While Webster's dogmatic structure and progress are in sympathy with his overall aims and his concurrent work, his theses were supported by limited engagement with the biblical evidence and the orthodox theological tradition. It may be concluded that, as in the previous chapter, Webster manages to maintain formal coherence with his overarching systematic method yet has not sufficiently demonstrated material coherence with respect to the specific theses he presents.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

The current project has sought to examine John Webster's definition of the holiness of God to determine to what extent his methods and conclusions are consistent with his stated theological vision and advocated methods. As has been demonstrated, at certain places in Webster's *Holiness* monograph he is not consistent with his own standards. Ultimately this systematic endeavour should be regarded as incomplete.

Chapter Two considered the theological priorities and principles Webster personally advocated in his published works in order to determine the standard by which his treatment of divine holiness should be measured. Webster was found to favour a systematic method that centred on the Triune God found in the narrative of Scripture rather than a general theism as only such a dogmatic could fulfil its role to serve the community of faith and act as a check and corrective on other disciplines of the academy. To this end, he adopted a high view of Scripture that drew from the work of Barth as well as traditional Reformed formulations. Scripture is the domain of the incarnate Word, the one who rules and is the personal self-disclosure of God. As such, the human testimony of divinely chosen ambassadors are authorised representations to the God who is revealed there. This

ordained testimony effects the gathering together of a redeemed community and invites reflection on, as well as interpretation of, divine self-disclosure. Theology, therefore, fulfils this invitation in acting as redeemed thinking in the presence of the revealed God. Faith is called to seek understanding, and thus to recapture the purpose of cognitive faculties as they were primarily intended. Reason is “baptised” in that it dies to the improper ways of the past but achieves new life oriented to knowing God as he has determined. A proper theology directed by the reality of a triune deity, according to Webster, will necessarily take on a threefold focus – on God as he is eternally *in se*, as he has revealed himself in all his works of creation and redemption, and in his ongoing life of fellowship with the redeemed community. It may therefore be expected that a dogmatic of holiness that Webster may construct will conform to this triune formulation while relying primarily on the interpretation of the authorised witness of Scripture in the Church to justify any conclusions.

Chapter Three considered the broader systematic context of Webster’s doctrine of God and the attributes as necessary for interpreting his work on divine holiness specifically. For Webster, God is the being of ultimate perfection, the one whose aseity is manifested in economic action, which he terms “inseity”. Divine aseity is equated with divine life, thus maintaining the priority of the immanent Trinity but which will necessarily overflow in redemptive action. The attributes of God will be descriptions of the personal divine nature as has been revealed to humanity and

thus a true comprehension will require a personal encounter with the divine. While displaying some Barthian influence, it is notable that Webster's approach has much sympathy with a more classical metaphysic present in pre-Barthian systematics than that embraced by contemporaries such as Gunton or McCormack.

Webster's theology of the holiness of God in the *Holiness* monograph was then evaluated with reference to the standards that he had advocated. In Chapter Four, which examined the holiness of the triune God proper, it was noted that in the prolegomena of his study Webster stated his desire for a trinitarian dogmatic of holiness which would be marked by holy speech, defined as an exegetical approach to Scripture as expressed in the life of the Church and perfected towards relational ends between God and the redeemed community. The stated aims for this particular dogmatic exercise therefore explicitly adhere to Webster's broader theological aims. The holiness of God was determined by Webster to take on a threefold form – God is holy in his eternal triune being, holy in all his works, and as the holy one in the midst of the redeemed community. It was shown that Webster's systematic was an attempt to advance from past binary debates and ground the holy character of God in the immanent Trinity which is then revealed in the economic and therefore with relational holiness acting as the nexus between them. Holiness is therefore a relational attribute rather than one which primarily describes transcendent ontology or moral perfection.

The practical realities of this relational attribute were addressed in Chapter Five, which focused on Webster's view of the holiness of God in the holiness of the Church and the Individual. God is relationally holy in that he is the one who operates to create and redeem a holy community in which he may dwell in fellowship with Creation and that he perfects by the Holy Spirit the individual believer to live out the called life of fellowship and service. God is holy in that he is the foundation for the holiness of those who will dwell with him.

Examination of Webster's theology of divine holiness in Chapters Four and Five revealed that his systematic approach displayed certain inconsistencies which undermined his conclusions. Webster's theology achieves a broad formal coherence, in that his stated aims and priorities for his systematics identified in his other works were reflected in the shape of his account of divine holiness. His focus consistently remained on the character of the triune God as revealed in the incarnate Son and pursued for the ends of a renewed life of fellowship for the Church. Webster's intent was not a work of philosophical theology but on the understanding and interpretation of the revealed character of God in the redeemed community. However, it must be noted that Webster does not consistently demonstrate material coherence in his systematic analysis. Despite his stated desire for an exegetical theology interpreted by the faith of the Church this is not a

method which he employs rigorously. Certain points of his arguments lack any exegetical warrant at all or rely on isolated verses removed from specific or biblical theology context. Theological dialogue partners in places are approved or rejected by Webster without demonstrated warrant for this determination. Webster's individual points are not so exotic as to be considered explicitly unorthodox, but his lack of solid exegetical foundation (particularly after having promised such) requires an inherently sympathetic reading in order for his theses to be accepted. It is possible to speculate regarding what Webster's exegetical foundations may have been but as Webster does not openly state them it is impossible to evaluate them fairly against alternate propositions. It was noted that Webster's later view on the authority of Scripture as an authorised witness to be read in light of the historic understandings of the Church may have meant that subsequent treatments may not have relied as heavily on explicit exegetical warrant as seemed to be foreshadowed by Webster in his introduction. However, it is preferable to read Webster's later elevation of historic voices in his systematic method as acting in support of Scripture as authenticated and approved divine witness rather than a diminishing or rejection of it. While some of Webster's points are supported with reasonably robust exegesis, the inconsistency of his presentation across the monograph is of such a nature that material coherence cannot be confidently ascribed.

That Webster's doctrine of the holiness of God achieves formal but not material coherence suggests that his systematic conceptions around the topic may have been

in the process of formation at the time of the publication of *Holiness*. Webster's thoughts in his monograph on Holy Scripture had been the subject of subsequent update and clarification and it is likely that his views on divine holiness would have received significant expansion in his planned multi-volume systematic. His Kantzer Lectures, which were evidence of further organisation and refinement of his approach to the doctrine of God in general may have represented the direction of his more mature thought. However, at the time of writing it is not possible to determine to what extent Webster may have intended further revisions or expansions for his authoritative systematic. In a review of the *Holiness* monograph, Leslie helpfully reflects:

The brevity of the work means, of course that neither a thorough critique of social trinitarianism, nor a comprehensive defence of Webster's own proposal are to be found within its pages. Nevertheless, the considerable logical force of the argument opens intriguing possibilities for pursuing a relational ontology of the divine being in the context of Western trinitarianism.<sup>287</sup>

Despite the identified issues, Webster's work on the doctrine of God and divine holiness should be recognised as a bold attempt to move discussion of knowledge of God and the attributes beyond the recent conflict between classical orthodox foundations on the immanent Trinity and the post-Barthian reliance on the divine

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<sup>287</sup> Ben Leslie, "Holiness", *PRS* (2005): 467-473.

economy. Webster's recasting of holiness as a relational attribute was a unique contribution to the contemporary discussion, designed not to reject the premises of earlier positions but to unite them. Webster was at heart a theologian who sought to practice redeemed thinking in God's presence by meditating on the witness of Scripture along with the one holy catholic Church rather than merely his own theological tribe. Future studies may seek to engage with the question of holiness as a relational attribute to determine whether Webster's dogmatic can be supported by a more rigorous examination of exegesis and biblical theology as he had proposed.

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