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William J. Abraham

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‘I CAN SEE PEOPLE, BUT THEY LOOK LIKE TREES WALKING’

A Response to Professor Webster

by William J. Abraham

THERE were times in the writing of *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* when I was tempted to give up entirely. I was swimming upstream against the strong currents which for so long have seen canon as a criterion; moreover, gaining even minimal control of the historical materials at stake was daunting. The review by Professor Webster has more than compensated me for my efforts. It provides exactly the kind of probing and creative reflections on canon that I had hoped to elicit from theologians. He has not led me to change my mind on the central thesis nor on some of the crucial historical judgments I have deployed, yet his comments as a whole are extremely pertinent to the issues in hand.

We are in agreement on the need to revisit the whole topic of canon. My revisiting is as disturbing and puzzling as the analogy with Nietzsche would suggest. We further agree that the Christian tradition has disintegrated and is in need of healing and repair. Stories of diagnosis and prescription related to this abound at present. My own work is a contribution to this, but in no way do I think that my story is either complete or comprehensive. It can be supplemented in any number of ways. Within my story, my central thesis is relatively simple. We should recover the idea that canon means essentially a list rather than a criterion. We should expand the material identification of canon to take in more than scripture, so it can cover the whole canonical heritage of the early church, which is constituted by materials, practices, and persons. In turn this heritage should be received as a gift of the Holy Spirit to be used appropriately as a network of means of grace in spiritual formation. This allows for extensive latitude in the epistemology of theology, an enterprise that should be pursued on its own terms in conversation both with suggestions within the canonical heritage

and with recent insights in the rich field of general epistemology. As Webster notes, I also think that my work calls for a re-orientation in the work of systematic theology, but I do not even hint at what that might be.¹

Our deepest disagreements center on how to construe the work of crucial figures in the tradition, notably Aquinas and the Reformers. I will turn to these in a moment, but it is essential first to indicate the kind of argument I am deploying overall.

My work is not a history of canon in the Christian tradition; nor is it a casual stroll through the history of theology as a whole. Nor is it an abstract, theoretical exercise from above that would ride roughshod over the details of historical events and materials. It is by design a series of conceptual soundings in the tradition. In this regard the analogies with genealogy and archaeology are helpful, but their causal overtones must not be pressed too far. At this point I think that Webster has misread my opening chapter. The journey (admittedly a misleading metaphor) I trace there from canon to criterion is not some logical scheme of connection that I then try to impose on what happens in history. It is an effort to alert the reader to the ideas which lie connected to the idea of canon and to draw attention to the possibility of potential revolutionary shifts in the tradition. The aim is to provide crucial conceptual orientation in an arena where we suffer from severe intellectual cramp. To be sure, I do think that one can trace extremely interesting shifts in the tradition. Consider, for example, the crucial shift from canon to criterion, the internal secularization of the epistemology of Reformed theology to be found in Descartes, and the attempt to invent new canon that one finds in early forms of feminist theology. But these are real shifts; they are not imposed from on high. I am less interested in some causal chain, or in a comprehensive, synchronic interpretation of scripture, than in a succession of snapshots. My aim is to cut through to the crucial epistemological moves made in the tradition and draw attention to the comparisons and contrasts with earlier and later soundings.²

¹ I think we need much more than commentary and glosses on canon, but that must remain for another day.

² Webster objects that this concern with epistemology leads me to fall into the 'epistemic concentration' which I deplore. This is not the case. It is one thing to be concerned about epistemology; it is another to locate canon within debates in epistemology. For my part it is right and proper to work through issues of

Webster is profoundly uneasy with this to the point where he thinks that my treatment of crucial figures is seriously misleading and that when totaled up cumulatively the argument looks threadbare. Some of his worries here are well taken. For instance, while aware of the work of Jewell and other great Anglican figures, I deliberately focused on the magisterial work of Hooker. Other worries are not founded. I do not think that everything hinges on the development of the *filioque* clause. I make it clear that the seeds for the shift from canon and criterion are already present in the Fathers some of whom, like Cyril of Jerusalem, were clearly committed to a doctrine of *sola scriptura*. My claim is that the church never endorsed Cyril's view of scripture and that the emergence of the *filioque* was the occasion for some of these seeds to sprout and proliferate. Moreover, the omission of Kant was, as noted, quite deliberate, and Webster's own portrayal of Kant only confirms my view that on the issue of canon he has nothing new to add to the debate. Kant is crucial, of course, in the demise of natural theology and hence of reason as a replacement of revelation, and his extraordinary conceptual revolution continues to have repercussions.³

Webster shows little substantial interest in the latter half of my soundings, and he thinks it odd that I let the philosophers back in at the end. His deepest objection centers in on the treatment of Aquinas and the Reformers. His main suggestion is that I should have attended not just to the avowals, say, of Aquinas, but also to the actual use of scripture in his theology and in his commentaries. Somehow this is thought to save the day and to pave the way for a better genealogy of canon. Unhappily this is an illusory hope. Examination of the usage does not alter the central claims I advance. On the contrary, Aquinas' use of scripture fits nicely with his conception of canon

epistemology, a point I make at some length in my last chapter. However, I make it abundantly clear that I want issues of canon to be relocated elsewhere. The burden of much of my argument is that the price we pay for epistemizing the canonical heritage is massive. One way to do this is to show in some detail and in radically different theologies how epistemology warps our way of understanding canon.

³ In a footnote Webster considers that Newman's *Grammar of Assent*, if included, would somehow be a problem for my analysis of Newman. On the contrary, the *Grammar of Assent* simply spells out the deeper elements of Newman's remarkable epistemology. It does not at all effect the core of my main argument.

in the opening section of the *Summa Theologiae*. In fact, it would be astonishing if his use of scripture was at odds with his conception of scripture. Moreover, I nowhere claim that those committed to canon as a criterion cannot deploy scripture even brilliantly as a means of grace, say, in their commentaries or pastoral writings. Let me put the matter sharply. Either Aquinas' use of scripture is at odds with his conception or it is not. If it is not, then my central claims stand. If it is, then he is inconsistent. What we need here is specific evidence that overturns my reading of the early part of the *Summa*.

Much the same applies in the case of the Reformers. They are indeed remarkable and insightful commentators. They put their vast intellectual labors at the service of pastoral and spiritual formation. Their skills in rhetoric are rightly recovered and praised in recent work. Yet they too have a conception of scripture which cannot be ignored or set aside.⁴ Again we need specific evidence to challenge the details of my proposal. I suspect that Webster hopes to rescue them from my analysis by blaming most if not all of it on their later followers in the bogey world of scholasticism, but this is a weak reed at best. Luther, of course, is a fascinating case. I agree entirely that we cannot divorce his view of scripture from his views on grace, faith, justification, and Jesus Christ. In fact, I insist on this. What I argue, however, is that he is ineluctably drawn into the epistemology of theology even if it is against his will and ultimately at the cost of his great central insights on justification.⁵ His conception of scripture cannot be palmed off on later scholastics who do indeed develop a further world of their own beyond him. Luther, like Calvin, has a clear conception of scripture that must be confronted head on if we are to take him seriously.

Most damaging of all in my critique of the Reformers is my claim that they both exemplify and help create the kind of

⁴ This applies equally to the great Princeton theologians. They were remarkable preachers and pastors in their day. The pastoral and devotional work, for example, of Charles Hodge, can be very illuminating and spiritually nourishing. Yet somehow Webster leaves intact my critique of their work. One of the delights of the history I trace is that the nature of scripture often works against the conception of scripture deployed so that scripture continues to function as a means of grace in spite of us and our theories.

⁵ The latter, of course, remain a matter of debate, as the recent Finnish interpretation of Luther's soteriology makes clear.

classical foundationalism which has been savaged of late in both theology and philosophy. It is to me an irony of ironies that the best recent critics of classical foundationalism have come from within the Reformed tradition of epistemology. The obvious explanation for this is that folk want to reject classical foundationalism but somehow remain committed to the work of the great Reformers. I think that this is only possible if we exclude the materials to which I have drawn attention. Webster says that I attribute to the Reformers 'something like a pathological form of Cartesian fundamentalism'. He has gotten the matter back to front. My claim is exactly that Descartes' epistemology is a transposed form of the pathological epistemology of the Reformers. And what is pathological here? It is their commitment to a form of classical foundationalism in theology. Furthermore, contrary to what is claimed, I take the context here with the utmost seriousness, for the work of Descartes and Locke is driven in part precisely by wider political and epistemic worries. If I am right in this, then the standard histories in both theology and philosophy badly need to be revised. In addition, the whole matter of the forms of foundationalism, starting with the distinction between moderate and classical expressions, will need to be revisited.⁶

In this as in other matters the work of philosophers will have to be more seriously engaged than is currently the case within theology. We can, to be sure, welcome help from every quarter, including help from work in exegesis and dogmatics. Yet at time when there has been remarkable progress in epistemology, it would surely be shortsighted to restrict work on the epistemology of theology to theologians. Webster is not saying this, but the point needs to be made with some emphasis because of the uneasy relations that have held and still hold between philosophers and theologians.

One final comment: I am not entirely convinced that Webster has taken the full measure of my claim that there is more to canon than scripture and that we need to relocate it as one element in a network of means of grace within the church. In the end he wants to pursue two sorts of inquiry. He proposes,

⁶ I stand by the claim that Barth is a foundationalist, indeed an extremely interesting foundationalist.

first, a study of 'the practices with which *the canon* is surrounded' and, second, an inquiry into canon which 'is not just a sociology of *the canon* but a depiction of it which appeals to the church's self-description in its language of God, Christ, Spirit, revelation and so forth.'⁷ I readily welcome such work, but, as noted, I am not clear how far a study of the relevant practices will really help us. Certainly, the practices cannot be abstracted from the conceptions of canon held. Moreover, in the wake of the work of MacIntyre and Alston, we need to be clear what is at stake when we speak of practices. Given the epistemic overtones of the notion of practice, we must ask if this is one more effort to relocate canon in epistemology. If so, we are still on the old train that leaves the station in a fanfare of hope and then crashes again and again. Furthermore, Webster's second proposal takes us in time straight back into the arms of revelation, that crucial but complex epistemic notion which has bedeviled treatments of canon in the past. What is most telling, however, is that Webster slips from talk of canon to talk of *the canon*, and we are right back into construing canon materially as scripture. If I have any medicine to offer, then in my terms Webster is not blind about canon, but maybe he still sees people as trees walking.

WILLIAM J. ABRAHAM
Perkins School of Theology
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas 75275
USA

⁷ Emphasis added.