

John Bainbridge Webster MA, PhD (Cantab.), DD *hc* (Aberdeen)

20 June 1955 – 25 May 2016

One of the most distinguished Anglican theologians of his generation, The Revd. Canon Professor John Webster served both church and academy internationally, and played a substantial role in the revitalization of the discipline of systematic theology.

Born in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, he was brought up in West Yorkshire. Educated at Bradford Grammar School, he specialized in languages and literature, going up to Clare College, Cambridge as an Open Scholar in 1974. He read English initially but switched to Theology at the end of his first year. An outstanding student, he graduated with a First and the Burney Prize and proceeded to PhD study at Clare as Beck Exhibitioner. His doctoral research was on the demanding work of the German theologian, Eberhard Jüngel (b. 1934), whose repertoire, then little known in Britain, traversed New Testament studies, systematic theology, ethics, and the history of philosophy, with major debts to existentialist Lutheranism as well as to the work of the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Through Jüngel Webster moved on to extensive critical and constructive interpretation of Barth himself, becoming one of Barth's foremost analysts in English. But it was as a theological thinker in his own right that Webster would shine.

After Cambridge, he held a one-year research fellowship at the University of Sheffield before being appointed in 1982 to his first teaching position at St John's College, Durham. Ordained priest in the Church of England in 1984, he served an assistant curacy in County Durham and as Chaplain at St John's. Full-time parish ministry was a possibility, but in 1986 he moved across the Atlantic to teach systematic theology at Wycliffe College, Toronto, one of the founding schools in the later-nineteenth-century federation of church colleges that had evolved into the Toronto School of Theology. In the same year he published with Cambridge University Press *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to his Theology*, a broader version of his PhD thesis, which soon established itself as the key monograph for English speakers. Jüngel's theology continued to occupy him a good deal, resulting in further essays, translations, and editions over the coming years, including a *Festschrift* for Jüngel's sixtieth birthday in 1994.

One of the chief lessons Webster learnt from Jüngel was that Christian theology ought to deploy its own resources in engagement with modern culture. To one trained in the habits of 1970s English doctrinal criticism, that meant a fairly sharp challenge to prevalent instincts. In Canada he was influenced further by a certain style of North American "postliberal" theology often associated (loosely) with Yale, which encouraged him to probe cultural genealogies and interrogate intellectual and moral assumptions quietly embedded in late-modern readings of history and texts. Teaching in an ecumenical setting was enlightening also: it was clear that theological fault-lines were more complex than confessional differences; serious Roman Catholic and Orthodox thought seemed at least as stimulating as many standard-issue Protestant correlations with the world at large, or their anxious Catholic equivalents. Wherever it was, whatever its traditional inflection, Christian "culture" as a whole – the essential situation in which Christian faith ventured its most basic claims and practices – deserved to be seen as different by virtue of its professed constitution. Careful depiction of that difference signalled no philosophical retreat; it was fundamental to theology's potential to have anything interesting to say when it engaged extramurally.

The reasoning was much indebted to Barth; Webster found himself burrowing ever deeper into Barth's dogmatics. In this he came to feel that Barth's legacy evinced crucial emphases that postliberal thinking tended yet to underplay. Christian theology spoke in its own terms, but its particularity was not reducible to ethnography, a mere mapping of social form or domestic behaviour. It spoke primordially of God, and of all things else in relation to God. What Barth had shown with immense power was that this logic need not inhibit a rich account of the being, ways, and ends of rational creatures: it might well fund just such a thing in the right currency. Webster demonstrated the point with a landmark analysis of the later Barth's moral and sacramental theology, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (1995), and in other distinguished expository essays.

Webster spent ten happy years in Canada, attaining full professorial status in 1993 and becoming Ramsay Armitage Professor of Systematic Theology at Wycliffe in 1995. He held various academic administrative roles, including Chair of Department in the Toronto School of Theology; he played

active part in the life of the Anglican Church of Canada and also served the Christian community more widely, over several years holding an adjunct professorship at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, a Baptist foundation. In 1996 he returned to the UK as Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford. Firmly established as a scholar of world-class stature, he taught very effectively and attracted graduate students in numbers. Dissemination of strong research was a passion; in 1999, together with Colin Gunton of King's College, London, he founded the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, which soon emerged as an additional major outlet for serious work in the field. Barth continued to be an obvious focus in his writing: *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (1998) was followed by a skilfully crafted introductory text, *Barth* (2000), and editorship of *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (2000). A critical reader on postliberal theology, begun in partnership with a close Jesuit colleague in Toronto, George Schnier, was also published in 2000 (Schnier sadly died that same year). But Webster's interests lay increasingly in constructive work in Christian doctrine.

In this the essay was his preferred form, and the style could be quite stunning: a spare eloquence, demanding but always lucid; the range of reference and the polemic carefully controlled; tight movement from modest premise to peroration; the rhetoric unashamedly spiritual as well as conceptual. The flow was remarkable: Christology, ecclesiology, theological anthropology, ethics, and, not least, the theology of Christian Scripture and its interpretation. The papers began to be collected, first in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (2001). Others took shape from invited presentations or lecture series internationally; Webster gave lectures in Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and India as well as the UK. A fine short volume on *Holiness* (2003) derived from addresses in Texas; the Thomas Burns Memorial Lectures at the University of Otago in 1998, *The Culture of Theology*, first published in article form, would be critically edited and issued posthumously as a book in 2019.

A residentiary canonry of Christ Church went with the Oxford chair; Webster's considerable gifts as a preacher found regular deployment in Oxford and well beyond. A volume of sermons, mainly from these years, would later be published as *The Grace of Truth* (2011; reissued in 2015 as *Confronted by Grace: Meditations of a Theologian*). As in Canada, he also engaged in wider ecclesiastical service on various church commissions and advisory groups.

Webster found both stimulus and challenge in Oxford. He articulated a vision of "theological theology" which was in no sense narrow, but within which lay measured critique also of modern university theology's alienation from its own proper habits on account of its captivity by *wissenschaftlich* ideals; the discipline's academic marginalization was seen as one consequence of that process. Internal disorder as much as intellectual pressure from the outside lay at the heart of modern academic theology's loss of vigour. Renewal of confidence in theology's own assets – its classical resources of Scripture, doctrine, and creed – and renewal of attention to its core spiritual tasks of prayer and Christian discipleship were prescribed as remedy: that way, theology might in fact – *mirabile dictu* – serve academy and society as well as church a great deal better. Webster's gracious manner and his abilities in expressing his convictions spoke for themselves, albeit he remained conscious his reasoning was not mainstream.

In 2003 he was appointed to the Chair of Systematic Theology at the University of Aberdeen. There he found a somewhat more congenial environment, in which his sense of the discipline could be pursued with fewer inhibitions. He played a significant part in enhancing the research culture of his department, attracting new colleagues and providing a lively community of graduate students with exemplary tutelage in close reading of texts. Amidst a heavy schedule of supervision, his writing continued apace, all of it marked by ever more deeply reasoned principles on the nature of the field and the architecture of its themes. Barth studies never ceased to be an interest, as witness *Barth's Earlier Theology* (2005) and other work, but Webster was also keen to find correctives to the limitations he perceived in Barth's dogmatics, not least in the area of a duly textured trinitarian account of creation. He worked his way more and more into earlier authorities: the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed, the Fathers, and – to the surprise of some – Thomas Aquinas. This lent an increasingly formal precision to some of his work, but did not signal a dramatic shift in his basic concerns. It reflected his effort to give his "theological theology" the kind of weight it consistently required if the dignity, freedom, and responsibility of the world and its agents were to be treated aright: as realities predicable only in consequence of the infinite depths

of divine goodness. The essential perfection of God was the ground upon which theology could speak with proper depth of the being and end of everything else.

The place of the Bible, its nature, formation, and exegesis, was central to the approach: in Webster's assessment, doctrinal theology was an exercise in biblical reasoning as distinct from free *poiesis*; doctrinal rendition of the character and reception of Christian Scripture as instrument of divine speech was in turn crucial. An important series of *Scottish Journal of Theology* lectures at Aberdeen in 2001 was reworked as *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (2003). Other major papers on related themes appeared in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (2005) and *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (2012). The exposition was always nuanced as well as orderly, its pleas for *ressourcement* careful to avoid romanticism; Webster was ever keen to point up the ways in which theology was an inherently (not reluctantly) critical activity in consequence of its entire existence in relation to an untameable reality: the mystery of divine self-communication. False inflation of human achievements, churchly capital or ministerial authority earned firm critique. To see Webster's work as in any sense naïvely conservative, triumphalist or lacking in awareness of the challenges faced by Christian confession is quite mistaken. The positivity of the approach lay in its confidence in the self-authenticating adequacies as well as transcendent wonder of divine presence in action. Just as might theology be spared a ruinous introversion or bondage to cultural circumstance. Webster's version of divinity was Anglican, Reformed, evangelical; it was also catholic and ecumenical in its investments, and widely read in philosophy, literature, history, and criticism.

The range of theology's interests and methods required to be mapped expansively; 2007 saw the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, co-edited with Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance. Webster's disciplinary leadership was considerable: in addition to journal editing there was a new monograph series with Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, active membership of numerous advisory boards, and generous consultancy for journals, presses, learned societies, and research bodies. He played an important part in nurturing the work of emergent scholars internationally. Preaching and other ecclesiastical service continued in Aberdeen, as did lecturing and speaking engagements in the UK, North America, and New Zealand. He became Canon Emeritus of Christ Church, Oxford, in 2012.

In 2013 he was persuaded to accept the Chair of Divinity at St Andrews. The move proved not without its challenges, but he was ever a gracious colleague and continued to achieve an impressive amount amidst unanticipated pressures. An inspiring research seminar was run, graduate supervision continued to be dedicated, and welcome contributions were made to undergraduate teaching. Two more volumes of essays on theology, virtue, and intellect, principally from Aberdeen years, were issued as *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* (both 2016). A theological account of intellectual life at large was a strong interest, and demonstration of theology's capacity to enrich the work of the academy was an obvious aspect of that; his St Andrews inaugural, appropriately, took up the theme of intellectual patience. Academic service and presentations to research colloquia carried on alongside significant publishing commitments: he worked towards a final revision of his Kantzer Lectures at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois in 2007, *Perfection and Presence*; on a theological commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians; and on a set of studies on creation and providence. All this writing was intended as preparatory to something larger: a multi-volume *Systematic Theology*, first envisaged in three parts, then five, that would set out his mature thinking on the nature and shape of Christian confession and its essential intellectual and moral entailments. He continued to wrestle with the order and proportions of vast themes, and was expecting to take the project forward substantively once other burdens were eased. The completion of even the first stage, alas, was not to be, and the remaining preliminary ventures themselves did not make it beyond draft forms. Webster died suddenly at his home in Aberdeenshire not long before his sixty-first birthday.

An exceedingly modest scholar, Webster did not chase academic honours. He took quiet pleasure in a DD *honoris causa* from Aberdeen in 2003 and his Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 2005; he also found reward in nurturing his students, a good many of whom proved high achievers themselves, and was delighted to receive a *Festschrift* lovingly conceived by a few of the grateful for his sixtieth birthday. Most in his element in a research seminar, cant and bluster were there liable to be called for what they were, long-winded or daft arguments met with earthy

assessment. But the diffident were also heard and encouraged with much respect; he relished serious analysis of his ideas, had no wish to gather a party around him, and shunned cheap labelling of positions as substitute for engagement. Ever remarkably candid about his own persistent labours to think things through, he remained an open and courteous interlocutor. Academic vanity projects and other behaviours borne of personal insecurity were discerned at some distance; Webster was also very good at rising above professional trivia, showing considerable tolerance towards naysayers or those merely inclined to the chaotic. Getting on with what mattered – calmly, cheerfully, without fuss – was vital. The personal demands upon theology’s practitioners might be immense, but their work was also an inherently joyful vocation, a service of delight in the God in whom were to be found their deepest fulfilment and highest end. Seriously as he took his calling, Webster was never po-faced; he had a finely developed sense of mischief, and could be unforgettably witty in conversation. His Yorkshire persona remained its understated self wherever it travelled.

Essentially a private man, Webster was also instinctively generous in his manner; he maintained a considerable pastoral as well as professional correspondence with all kinds of people all over the world. He was a gentle mentor and encourager, one who noticed the unnoticed, a loyal, discreet, and resolute friend. He saw himself first and always as a disciple of Jesus Christ; his life was deeply marked by the rhythms of prayer, humility, and spiritual commitment. Personal challenges were faced with courage, dignity, and faith. He drove himself hard and at cost over the years, but enjoyed his garden, the arts, antiques, food and drink; he showed great kindness and much fun to children.

Even in the absence of its final synthesis, his constructive work evinces intellectual gifts of the highest order. The range and depth of his reading, the fertility of his integration of exegesis, concepts, and counsel, and his abilities as communicator were exceptional. The critical assessment of his legacy is under way; former colleagues and a growing body of doctoral students internationally have begun to generate a reflective literature. Far more remains to be considered, and built upon, in years to come. His scholarly achievements fully deserve that attention; it is his self-effacing personal example as a faithful Christian that remains especially powerful for those who knew him.

A service of remembrance and thanksgiving was conducted in St Andrews by Dr. Rowan Williams (Rt. Revd. and Rt. Hon. The Lord Williams of Oystermouth), on 27 August 2016.

Webster is survived by his wife, Gloria, and by his sons Tom and Joe from his first marriage to Jane.

Ivor J Davidson

formerly Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology,
Dean & Head of the School of Divinity and
Principal of St Mary’s College, University of St Andrews

**Revd. Canon Professor John Bainbridge Webster, MA, PhD (Cantab.), DD *hc* (Aberdeen).
Born 20 June 1955. Elected FRSE 2005. Died 25 May 2016.**