

religious encounter and editorial authorship. According to Ward, this verse 'arose as a response to experiences of the sovereignty of God that seemed to demand complete loyalty. This was then incorporated into the long speech of Moses . . . which set out the way of life of a people devoted to a God of justice and mercy' (p. 148).

Overall, Ward's book is a good response to New Atheism, but I need to register a few critical observations. First, because Ward is speaking from a Christian tradition his work could be strengthened if we heard more from these voices. For instance, much work has been done on the issue of hermeneutics and morality (Deut 20:16), but he does not draw many insights from articles, commentaries, or books. Second, having read a few of his other works on religion, I was surprised that Ward did not quote more scripture or cite more religious authorities from traditions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Judaism (see Chapter 8: 'What Is Revelation?'). Third, while I appreciate the overall tenor of Ward's book, a more persuasive style (see Chapter 4: 'Is the Universe Intelligently Designed?') would also benefit the reader. Rather than thinking, 'Religion is not irrational', my impression – upon reflecting on Ward's work is 'Religion is possible'.

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Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter, Stephen H. Webb, Oxford University Press, 2012 (ISBN 978-0-19-982795-4), xii + 343 pp., hb \$65

In his newest book, Stephen Webb has once again demonstrated his ability to range over the history of theology, engage in doctrinal analysis, work on inter-religious disputes, and critically engage current questions. This is a book that presents us with Webb's analysis of the history of Christology and the Trinity, and his engagement with the thinking of philosophers and theologians from Plato to Aquinas to Barth. There are many portions of this book that I would have my undergraduates read for an introduction to otherwise difficult philosophers and because of Webb's clarity of writing and often humorous and flavorful style.

This is a book that is hard to review because of its many facets and intricacies. However, I am going to trace Webb's main argument and then critically analyze it from a philosophical and theological perspective. In many ways his book cannot be reduced to this main thread because he offers gems of thought that stand on their own apart from

his thesis. Webb is a generous and global thinking theologian who desires unity among all those who proclaim the name of Christ. However, this same generosity can lead to a weakness wherein he holds to a term, in this case 'Christ', in a way that allows it to be so stretched that it borders on being emptied of all meaning. The same generosity that makes him kind and encouraging keeps him from being able to identify specious thinking and makes him look for depths of insight where there is simply lack of understanding. He faults those who seek to explain terms for ending rational inquiry, but then criticizes those who apply reason for not giving the mystical enough room. I hope to sort some of these problems out in the following so that we can benefit from Webb's work and also find ways to go further.

Webb's book reads like a mystery novel. We are alerted early on about what he considers to be the problem in current definitions of 'matter', the Trinity, and Christology, but then the book takes a historical turn to deconstruct thinkers and groups such as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth. He then attempts to weave in Joseph Smith as part of this dialogue and suggests that Mormonism offers insights about how to solve Christological problems that took an overly Platonic form in the early church. As I read this I kept asking 'yes, but what is Webb's view, what is the solution he'll give us?' Just like a good mystery novel, all is revealed at the end. For this reason I purposely did not allow myself to skip ahead but wanted the experience of following the story. Webb finally solves the mystery in the last pages of the conclusion and so wraps up his theological journey. Readers who flip to his last few paragraphs will be given his view, but will also miss out on the unfolding of his plot.

Before turning to the philosophical and theological aspects of Webb's answer, it is worthwhile to note a few points about how he approaches history. Although he has much of value to say about each of the thinkers he considers and I personally learned a great deal, his approach is too focused on motivations and political concerns of thinkers and plays with too many ambiguities on the words of the thinkers he quotes. He states that he relies on the historical work of David Paulsen who as a Mormon scholar relies on the interpretive presupposition that the early church had the Mormon view of God which was later polluted by Greek philosophy until the time of Joseph Smith. It is due to this interpretive assumption that much ambiguity is allowed a free pass. We are given to think that the early Church fathers had real questions about the nature of matter, spirit, Christ's body, where more careful attention to the meaning of terms would not allow this speculation. To help clarify these issues I'll now turn to specific philosophical points that inform Webb's approach.

Defining Matter. In order to begin with Webb's project we must first agree with him that 'matter' is a hard term to define. He introduces this

as a problem by appealing to contemporary concepts from physics like 'dark matter', 'dark energy', and 'anti-matter'. Further, he tells us that cognitive science is breaking down the barriers between matter and mind. The solution he offers is to no longer define these as opposites but rather a continuum. What this amounts to is a kind of monism, and we find that Webb does indeed try to reduce all being to one kind which is essentially a type of matter. By way of contrast, 'matter' is not hard to define at all and his examples do not problematize this. Matter is simply that which has extension and is non-conscious. Visible matter, dark matter, energy, dark energy, anti-matter, and the sub-atomic particle *de jour* are all extended beings.

Material monists have always argued that consciousness is the result of adding up little bits of non-conscious matter, and some contemporary cognitive scientists fall into this tradition. However, the standard example that is used is that when the right amounts of oxygen and hydrogen are put together we get water with the emergent property of 'wetness'. Neither hydrogen nor oxygen is wet, therefore emergent properties explain consciousness. Not so fast. Wetness is a descriptor for extended being. By adding extended beings we get an emergent property of extension, not non-extension. Such examples do not tell us that consciousness is the result of adding what is non-conscious together, nor do they tell us that thought is identical to some bits of matter in our brain or elsewhere. That there is a causal relationship between the brain and our mind does not reduce the one to the other or give them identity in being.

His analysis of the history of orthodoxy and heresy is shaped by the interpretive assumptions mentioned above. He looks at Christianity as having sought for a place between Platonists and Gnostics, and the outcome was the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. It is as if the Christians did not know what they believed, but wanted a seat at the table. This is consistent with the ambiguity about the definition of 'God' throughout the book. Christians, on this reading, were looking for a way to give God omnipotence and to protect God from being encroached upon by an evil material world. The solution was God as spirit and creation of matter *ex nihilo*.

By way of contrast, this history can be understood as addressing the question 'what is eternal'. This is another term that is somewhat ambiguous in the book, sometimes meaning without beginning, sometimes meaning outside of time, and sometimes meaning without end. Here I am distinguishing between eternal (without beginning) and everlasting (with beginning but without end). This history is a study of what has existed from eternity. For reasons that Webb agrees to and that we will consider in a moment, the material world is not eternal. If material being is not eternal then what is eternal must be a spirit (conscious). Christians begin with this assumption, as opposed to

simply the desire to distance God from evil matter or make God omnipotent. Whatever is eternal is by definition omnipotent and omniscient so there is no need to do further work.

That matter is evil was a common assumption in Greek philosophy. However, Christians, relying on Genesis, understood matter to have been originally good and that natural evil entered the world after sin. This does not make matter in itself evil, and so the Christians did not need to distance God from matter. Genesis affirms both that God created matter and that matter is good as it reveals the creator. Webb does extensive work to discuss what the future state of matter will be like, as if it is transformed in itself; nevertheless, through all of this discussion we are still left with extended being when talking about matter.

Webb says (p. 262) that the problem in discussing matter is that it assumes we know what matter is, and then says that Mormonism asks us to imagine a kind of matter we have not yet experienced. Does Mormonism ask us to imagine matter that is not extended? If so, in what sense is it matter? If not, then on this same page Webb gives us a powerful argument for how we know matter has not existed from eternity: 'After all, what expands must eventually wind down. Indeed, if God is material, must not he have, if not a beginning, then an end?'

The creeds are not as confusing as Webb wants us to believe. Part of this lies in the problems of ambiguity in his discussion of terms like invisible, incorporeal, and immaterial. If the being of God is spirit then God is invisible not in the way that air is invisible, but because spirit is not extended and so light does not bounce off of it. God is omnipresent consciously, not spatially. Webb turns these same problems to the person and nature of the Son. Much of this plays on whether the Logos was embodied before the incarnation. Webb wants to suggest the idea that matter can be a perfection of God, and so the Son can be eternally embodied. However, it cannot be a perfection of God if it cannot be eternal, and Webb gave us good reason to understand that it cannot.

Being and Knowing. Continuing on his theme of more accurately defining matter, Webb gives helpful analysis of the linguistic philosophy of Scotus and Aquinas. Specifically, the univocal theory of Scotus and the analogical theory of Aquinas. Driving this for Webb is the need for humans to know God. He rightly points out that Aquinas's theory ends in mysticism and the inability to know God, as did Aquinas in his personal life. Webb believes that Scotus gives us more hope. However, for this to be the case we must unpack how Webb understands terms like 'being', 'person', 'spirit', and 'nature'. These terms are sometimes used ambiguously, and sometimes used with a general assumption that whatever exists can be experienced by the senses (and is therefore 'matter').

Webb's concern is that if God does not have an eternal body then we cannot know God as He is totally other than us and not something we can experience. Behind this is a kind of empiricism about knowledge. If

we grant this empiricism then it follows on Webb's line of thinking that we cannot know about spirit as being since it is non-extended and therefore not something we experience with the senses.

Supralapsarianism. Another central theme for Webb is that Jesus must have been eternally embodied because the incarnation cannot have been an afterthought. This blends into the next theme of Christology so there will be some overlap. Webb criticizes only the most extreme dispensational version of infralapsarianism, in which God creates, sin happens, and then God must come up with a plan of what to do. Webb never interacts with more thoughtful infralapsarianism such as that suggested by Charles Hodge. In this version, the relation of events is first logical and then temporal. There is a logical order between creation, fall, and redemption, as opposed to the supralapsarian view in which God decides to send the incarnate Son and this would have happened regardless of what humans did with respect to sin.

It would be hard to analyze this in much more depth because Webb seems at times to accept that God might not know the future, or might change in his knowledge or power. An infralapsarian position as given by Hodge affirms that God is omnipotent and omniscient, and therefore all that comes to pass does so according to the will of God. Readers can look to Hodge's *Systematics* for his discussion of whether this makes God the author of sin. If Webb had defined God as an eternal spirit then many of these questions would already have been settled for him. But that he is open to other alternatives for understanding God just shows that this term, 'God', is highly moveable for Webb and not a fixed point. This has implications when he talks about knowing God, and about the importance of God, in that if we do not know what God is then it is hard to say we or others know God or value God.

Christology. Almost every page of this book contains Webb's thesis that all theology must be Christological. To be Christological means to have Christ as the center of all thinking and history. The purpose of all creation is to cumulate in the Christ-nature. Therefore, Webb infers, must not that nature have existed from eternity? How could the most important aspect of history have come into existence at the birth of Christ? Of course, keeping Chalcedon in mind, the human nature of Christ, both mind and matter, had a beginning, but not the eternal Son of God. Yet Webb feels this somehow diminishes the fullness of who Christ is, and the solution is to have embodiment be a gift from the father to the son from eternity. Only in this way can we make sense of how humans are the image of God.

Of course, this solution is not really a solution so much as it is an erasing one of the two natures of Christ. Both natures, according to this view, are divine. And that is acceptable to Webb because of the next theme we will consider, divinization – humans are on the road to being divine. By denying that there is a difference in kind between God and

man Webb can make human nature eternal. This is done because Webb reasons that if God and man are different in kind then we cannot know anything about God. However, this statement is self-referentially undercutting. We know that God is different in kind than us because God is eternal and we are created; that difference is the basis and beginning for our knowledge of God.

It would be hard for Christians not to be Christ-centered. However, this can be taken in two ways. Christ-centered because all of redemptive history relies on the work of Christ, or Christ-centered because no matter what that term (Christ) ends up meaning it is the Christian focus. Unfortunately, Webb seems to take the latter.

Webb applauds Mormons for being Christ-centered. He says that their problem is not in loving Christ too little, but in loving him too much. He uses an analogy from a funeral where a loved one has died, and while sharing stories from this person's life we notice another group at the funeral also sharing stories but different stories from those we have heard. They loved this person just as much as us, and they have more to add to the story of the person's life. The problem, of course, is that this is not a full analogy. The actual analogy would be that this other group is sharing stories that starkly contradict the person we all knew, suggesting this person was a different kind of being than we had known, and that they arrived at this knowledge through the vision of their leader. I do not think we would conclude they loved this person as much as we did, but rather we would ask why they think these stories are true, and why anyone would accept such a vision.

Webb's intentions are to create healthy inter-religious dialogue, but his method is not helpful. Although he wants to define 'matter' and 'spirit' in a way that makes them inclusive of each other, he ends up simply defining everything in terms of extended matter. This is not acceptable to one of the sides he wishes to bring together. Nor will it be helpful to agree that there are indeed two kinds of being since the other side will not accept this. Intentions aside, it must sometimes be accepted that there are real disagreements and that both sides cannot be correct (although both could be incorrect); unity in such cases will only be achieved by those in error making the change that is theologically called repentance.

Divinization. Webb's Christology leads him to say that the goal of human life is to become like Christ ontologically as well as ethically. This is supported by his supra-lapsarianism in that whether the fall had occurred or not, Christ would have become incarnate to show us the way to become divine. He especially relies upon Eastern Orthodox thinkers for whom it is more common to speak about divinization. Yet this is another instance of ambiguity. From my own reading of Eastern Orthodoxy, and from those I know in this tradition, I am assured that this is not what they mean by divinization. It is more akin to what

Protestants call sanctification. The Eastern Church makes a distinction between the essence and the energy of God. Humans will never share in the essence of God because only God is eternal. Humans can share in the energy of God by being more like God in the areas of knowledge, holiness, and righteousness.

Webb seeks to find unity on this idea of divinization between Christians and Mormons. Yet when the ambiguity is clarified there is still a difference in kind. Christians hold that God has existed from eternity, without beginning or parents, and that therefore no created human will ever be God (as if one could have a beginning and then grow to have no beginning). Mormons hold that the God of this world had a beginning after the manner of human beginnings, and grew to be God; furthermore, humans can imitate this and grow to be a God as well. Webb speaks about the great pre-history of Christ and human souls that Mormonism adds, but this is consistent with their material monism: no being has an actual beginning, all being has existed from eternity in essence and anything new is simply the rearranging of this material being. By conceding this possibility Webb is taking a step towards monism and away from theism. Of course he may think that's the correct move, but it cannot be called a 'middle way' or a 'unifying position'.

The combination of these above themes gives us the constellation that forms Webb's work. Webb's reasoning about the heavenly flesh of Jesus requires that his thinking on each of these points is correct. At each point above I have already indicated why there do not exist the problems Webb sees and how other problems arise for him, but I would also like to conclude by offering him an alternative path for some of his concerns.

Webb expresses to us that his motivation is to show the divine in the material world, as opposed to the belief that matter is simply chunks of stuff with no value. His solution traced through the themes above, is to give Jesus an eternal body that is the basis for the rest of the material world and therefore gives divine value to matter. I have considered the problems in this view. However, I believe we can keep Webb's motivation, and indeed be consistent with historic Christianity, without his heavenly flesh solution.

Specifically, Webb briefly touches on the original state of the creation as very good, but never considers in much depth the introduction of natural evil. At best it is a kind of 'heaviness' given to matter, rather than the curse of old age, sickness, death, toil, and strife. That the original creation is very good has been understood to mean that it reveals the eternal power and divine nature of God. This natural revelation is clear to all humans so that unbelief is without excuse. Yet, rather than glorify God humans have exchanged the glory of God for the image of material creatures (heavenly flesh? Too soon?). Even this condition reveals who God is because God's response is the offering of his Son as the atoning sacrifice needed for redemption.

Thus, Webb's concern to raise the importance of matter and give a theology of matter need not go in the direction of heavenly flesh or the eternity of Christ's body. It can instead reconnect with the very nature of being noted above: we know being by how it appears and what it does, never directly. Therefore, we know the being of God by what God does. This is true in God's acts of creation and providence, and also true in God's work of redemption. It is in knowing God that humans come to have eternal life in the sense of partaking in the life of God in the way that humans are able.

Nor does this threaten the value of the Logos. Rather, John 1 gives us this framework for the Logos. The Logos was with God and is God, is the light of man – that light that makes understanding possible. Obviously this cannot be physical light since many things are understood without light and physical light has not always existed. This connects to the meaning of Logos as reason. The Logos is the Son of God in relation to making God known, as the Word expresses the speaker. This Logos is in the world making God known, and coming through the prophets to deepen that revelation.

Yet in these revelations the Logos was rejected. It is at this point that the Logos becomes incarnate as the most personal revelation of the Logos to personally encounter sin and the rejection of the knowledge of God. This incarnation must be understood in relation to the earlier rejections. Indeed, it is this context that makes sense of Christology and without which it is lost. To simply assert that Christ must be central begs the question. The need for Christ is in relation to these ways of knowing God and their rejections. Is it indeed clear that God exists from creation and providence? Or is the nature of God unclear and ambiguous. If the latter then how do we know that God the Father and Son exist at all as Webb assumes? However, if the works of God do clearly reveal God so that both the denial of God and the misrepresentation of God are inexcusable, then Webb can find here the value and importance of the material world.

Finally, this connects to Webb's assertion that all of these considerations are valuable because they relate to the truth about God. Indeed it speaks to the need to be restored and redeemed from the failure to know God as we should. Christ is central because the Logos is that by which God is known, but Christ is also central because he redeems from the rejection and misrepresentation of God.

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