



A THESIS NAILED TO THE REGENSBURG DOOR: SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT STEPHEN WEBB'S CHALLENGE TO THE GREAT TRADITION

Francis J. Beckwith

Department of Philosophy, Baylor University

In his learned and provocative tome, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God*,¹ Stephen H. Webb plows the soil of hallowed ground. He broaches a topic that most classical theists have considered a settled question for quite some time, namely, that God is by nature the immaterial ground of being. Webb concludes, most remarkably, that matter is one of God's perfections, and for that reason, God—not just the post-incarnational second Person of the Trinity—is embodied.

He does not offer a simple argument, with a few premises and a conclusion, as one is accustomed to seeing in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. Rather, his case is in the form of an extended engagement with a variety of figures in the history of Christian theology and American religion, including Origen, Arius, St. Augustine, Nestorius, St. Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth, and Joseph Smith, Jr. Along the way, Webb finds the time to discuss issues in science, metaphysics, and philosophical anthropology.

This is not to say that Webb does not offer any arguments. It just means that in making his case he takes special care in trying to account for points of view with which he disagrees while properly situating his own position in the history of Christian thought and philosophical theology.

Consequently, it would be sheer folly for me to attempt to offer an assessment of Webb's case that claims to capture his remarkable tapestry of philosophical and theological engagement. For this reason, I will limit my task to raising three questions in order to draw critical attention to what I believe is the operative assumption that drives Webb's case for an embodied God: Christianity can be dehellenized and still remain Christianity.

I. Can One Separate the Bible from the Integrity of Theological Development?

Webb writes:

[T]he doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not explicitly stated in the Genesis creation account. Scholars used to point to texts like 2 Maccabees 7:28–29, Romans 4:17, and Hebrews 11:3 to show its latency in the Bible, but the consensus now is that this idea did not take explicit form until the second half of the second century. Like many orthodox Christian ideas, it was born in a battle against heresy as well as centuries of adjustment to Greek philosophy. Since it was not a part of the biblical revelation or the earliest Christian tradition, the burden is on its supporters to demonstrate why it should be taken as an unconditionally necessary and permanently irreversible development of the faith. (46; note omitted)

Setting aside the question of whether this account can be challenged,² it nevertheless poses a peculiar problem for Webb: the development and fixing of the Christian canon, that includes the books of Romans and Hebrews (and 2 Maccabees by way of the Church's embracing of the Septuagint), occurred alongside and in concert with the Church's development of the philosophical theology Webb now rejects. As D. H. Williams writes, "[T]he means by which the biblical books were regarded as inspired and divinely given for Christian doctrine and practice took place in the postapostolic centuries of the early church. This process was a gradual and untidy one that emerged out of the worship and liturgical practices of the early churches."³

Every major doctrinal dispute in the first six centuries of the Church required an elegant and rationally defensible interaction between the text of Scripture (the canon of which had not even been fixed yet) and certain philosophical categories. So, for example, when the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325) asserts that the Church believes in "one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance [*ek tēs ousias*] of the Father,"⁴ and when the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) affirms that Jesus Christ is "the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity" and that "at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being,"⁵ both councils are in fact employing philosophical terms of art—such as "substance," "rational soul," "consubstantial," "nature," "subsistent," and "perfect"—that provide a conceptual framework by which we may better understand the depiction of Christ in Scripture.



Just as the rules of grammar are essential to reading the Bible even though these rules are not derived from the Bible, the philosophical categories integral to the creeds provide assistance to the theologian as he practices his craft while he seeks wisdom from Scripture, even though these philosophical categories are themselves not explicitly articulated in Scripture (as if one can find the Tree of Porphyry in “Aristotle’s Letter to the Christians”). (Webb, in fact, does something similar when he suggests that we employ the insights of contemporary physics when assessing what the Bible means by matter; see 7-13.)

The same Church that employed both Scripture and philosophy in its settlement of the disputes at Nicaea and Chalcedon understood itself as having the authority to ecclesiastically finalize these disputes by affirming one side as orthodox and the other as heretical. And this same Church also fixed the canon of Scripture, which Webb pits against the Church’s philosophical theology and thus its reading of that Scripture. It’s not clear how Webb can do this without suggesting the counterintuitive notion that the Church was guided by the Holy Spirit to select what books belong in Scripture but was not guided by the Holy Spirit in its beliefs about nature, God, and Christ in its reading of that Scripture. Webb’s burden requires that he explain why a Nicean Christian should not read the Scripture along with the Church that fixed the Scripture’s canon without re-opening the canon question all together. After all, if the Church didn’t get God right, then who’s to say it got the content of the Bible right either? Thus, by suggesting that we choose “the Bible” over “the Church’s theology,” Webb is cherry-picking the normativity of the tradition, since the Church’s theology is a consequence of how the Church that had the authority to fix the canon read the canon.

II. Could Plato Receive the Eucharist Without Mental Reservation?

Another curious aspect of Webb’s narrative of theological development is his reliance on reasoning very similar to that found in the work of Adolf Harnack (1851-1930), who maintained that Jesus’ original message and its roots in Judaism had been corrupted by the influence of Greek philosophy.⁶ Beginning with the Reformation, claimed Harnack, Christians started on the project of restoring the pristine, untarnished, Christian faith that had been lost for roughly a millennium and a half. Harnack, however, also thought that portions of the New Testament itself had already been sullied by Hellenistic ideas.⁷ But if that is the case, then either the authoritative Scripture that Webb offers as a corrective is of a piece with the theological development that follows it, or the Scripture is no longer a normative guide in our theological inquiries, for it too must be purged of the handiwork of the Platonic mischief makers so that we can find the true kernel of Christ’s Gospel, as Harnack has suggested.⁸

To appreciate the difficulty this poses for Webb's thesis, consider Holy Communion, embraced as a sacrament by most Christians. The Catholic view, which is also shared by Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglo-Catholicism, affirms *eucharistic realism*, that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ when they are consecrated by an ordained priest celebrating the Mass. According to the *Catechism*, "The essential signs of the Eucharistic sacrament are wheat bread and grape wine, on which the blessing of the Holy Spirit is invoked and the priest pronounces the words of consecration spoken by Jesus during the Last Supper: 'This is my body which will be given up for you. . . . This is the cup of my blood. . . .'"⁹ (Luke 22:17-20). Thus, it seems odd that a Church that had so wholeheartedly embraced Greek, including Platonic, philosophical categories, as Webb claims, would develop a sacrament that was so imbued with the material world. And yet, its materiality does not tell the whole story.

Transubstantiation is what the Catholic Church calls what occurs when the bread and wine are transformed at consecration. The Church's explanation of transubstantiation was influenced by Aristotle's distinction between substance and accident. Aristotle (384-322 BC), like many of his ancient contemporaries, wanted to account for how things change and yet remain the same. So, for example, a substance like an oak tree remains the same while undergoing accidental changes. It begins as an acorn and eventually develops roots, a trunk, branches, and leaves. During all these changes the oak tree remains identical to itself. Its leaves change from green, red, and brown and eventually fall off. But these accidental changes occur while the substance of the tree remains. On the other hand, if we chopped down the tree and turned it into a desk, that would be a substantial change, since the tree would literally cease to be and its parts would be turned into something else, a desk. According to the Church, when the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, the accidents of the bread and wine do not change, but the substance of each changes. So it looks, tastes, feels, and smells like bread and wine, but it literally has been changed into the body and blood of Christ. That's transubstantiation.

Protestants, of course, hold a range of views about what happens to the bread and wine at communion. Some believe that it is not sacramental but merely an ordinance that commemorates Christ's death. For these Christians, communion is symbolic. This seems to be the dominant view among American Evangelicals, most of whom are members of ecclesial communions that do not have a history of sacramental theology. This, by the way, is also the same view of the Eucharist embraced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons),¹⁰ a group whose views of God and matter, according to Webb, arise as they do because the Mormons "do not play by the rules of the Nicene Creed" (244). Although these communities, both Protestant and Mormon, are apparently far less tethered to the Greek philosophical categories that Webb finds so debilitating to the recovery of a "biblical" understanding of philosophical the-



ology, one could just as easily claim that their symbolic view of the Eucharist is just the sort of diminishing of the physical world's capacity to appropriate the divine that one would expect from a community teeming with Platonic intuitions.

Thus, and ironically, the Catholic view is more materialist than the symbolic view precisely because it relies on Greek philosophical categories that require immateriality. In order for substantial change to occur in the bread and wine while the accidents remain the same the bread and wine's material characteristics—their shape, size, volume, etc.—must retain their identity before, during, and after the transformation just as they would if no substantial change had occurred. This means that substantial change without accidental change requires a change of the bread and wine's substantial form, which is not a material thing. (I discuss more about matter and form in part III). As St. Thomas writes: “The substantial form of bread is of the substance of bread. But the substance of the bread is changed into the body of Christ....Therefore the substantial form of the bread does not remain.”¹¹ Hence, the change that occurs is of an immaterial sort. And, as St. Thomas points out, “because a substantial form does not receive more and less, it follows that its introduction into matter is instantaneous,”¹² and is thus analogous to *creatio ex nihilo*.

Of course, those communities that reject the Catholic view, such as the Mormons, may point to these philosophical requirements and implications as precisely why the view ought to be rejected. But such a move is not so easy to make given the history and development of Eucharistic theology.

When Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples (Matt. 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–23), which Christians commemorate at Communion, he referred to it as a Passover meal. He called the bread and wine his body and blood. In several places, Jesus is called the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36; 1 Peter 1:19; Rev. 5:12). Remember, when the lamb is killed for Passover, the meal participants ingest the lamb. Consequently, St. Paul's severe warnings about partaking in Holy Communion unworthily make sense only in light of eucharistic realism (1 Cor. 10:14–22; 11:17–34). He writes, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ... Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:27 RSV). When one combines these passages with the fact that Jesus called himself the Bread of Life (John 6:41–51) and that he said his followers must “eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood” (John 6:53 RSV), it is not surprising to find that eucharistic realism is

uncontroversially embraced in the Early Church and not seriously challenged until the Middle Ages, and not rejected by an organized Christian body until the time of the Reformation.

This is why Protestant historian J. N. D. Kelly writes, “Eucharistic teaching, it should be understood at the outset, was in general unquestioningly realist, that is, the consecrated bread and wine were taken to be, and were treated and designated as, the Savior’s body and blood.”¹³ Thus, unsurprisingly one finds the view virtually ubiquitous in the works of the Early Church Fathers whenever they addressed the subject, such as in the cases of St. Ignatius of Antioch (A.D. 110),¹⁴ St. Justin Martyr (A.D. 151),¹⁵ and St. Cyprian of Carthage (A. D. 251).¹⁶ These are, of course, not the only Early Church Fathers whose writings address the nature of the Eucharist in such a realist fashion,¹⁷ though they are representative.

The development of Eucharistic theology historically occurs in concert with the organic relation between theological development, biblical canonicity, and the catholic creeds about which I wrote in part I of this article. For Eucharistic theology begins with the New Testament’s *prima facie* realism and is explicated, with greater clarity, precision, and rigor by subsequent generations of Christians who employed philosophical categories that the Church’s greatest thinkers and ecumenical councils thought congenial and illuminating to its reading of Scripture and the receptivity and passing on of the deposit of faith. Unsurprisingly, the philosophical categories that provided to the Church a convincing account of the transformation of the material realities of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ are *the same* categories that provided the Church with its understanding of the immaterial God and incarnate Christ that are central to its ecumenical creeds, and which Webb rejects.

III. What’s Really the Matter?

It is clear that material objects seem to have certain characteristics: they exist, have extension, are subject to quantifiable measurement, are contingent, are limited to the vicissitudes of time and space, and are particulars. But material objects differ from each other, not only terms of space and relation (e.g., object X is to the right of object Y), but they also differ in terms of the sort of thing each is (e.g., object X is a rock and object Y is my Cousin Vinny). So, material objects are the same insofar as they are material; but they are many insofar as they differ. This is the problem of the One and the Many. Philosophers from ancient times have wrestled with this question, and it is one that confronted Christianity as its thinkers encountered pagan philosophy.

Parmenides (early 5th century B.C.) gave one answer—everything is really one thing, that the plurality and change that we encounter in ordinary experience is an illusion. Heraclitus (c. 535 – c. 475 B.C.), on the other hand, gave another answer—all that exists is plurality and change and that the unity of things that we encounter in ordinary experience is an illusion.¹⁸



Plato (ca. 424 B.C. – 348 B.C.) and Aristotle provided answers as well. Plato offered what has come to be known as Extreme Realism, that the differing forms that material things take are the consequence of their participating in an immaterial world of real ideal forms in comparison of which the material things are imperfect copies. So, my dog Phydeaux, as with each material dog that exists, participates in an ideal dogness, which exists as an actual immaterial object in the World of Ideas. Aristotle, on the other hand, offered what has come to be known as Moderate Realism, that the forms of dogness, humanness, etc. are indeed real, but these forms are in the material objects themselves and not in the World of Ideas. Our minds, according to Aristotle, have the ability to abstract these forms when we engage in acts of simple apprehension. So, for example, when I say that Steve and Frank each possess a human nature, I have knowledge of a third thing that is neither Steve nor Frank. It is a universal abstract concept known as “humanness.” The form of human nature, its essence, is in the concrete particulars of Steve and Frank, but the universal concept of “humanness” is in my mind.

For both Plato and Aristotle the universe is eternal, since the stuff out of which the material world is made, prime matter, has always existed. What is prime matter? It is formless matter. For Plato, prime matter is given form by the Demiurge, a god-like being who fashions this formless stuff by imposing on it the forms from the World of Ideas. For Aristotle, prime matter has no existence without form. One can, for example, have direct acquaintance of those material objects that inhabit the world, but all of them are a composite of form and prime matter. Thus, prime matter is literally unobservable, just as a colorless dog is unobservable even though we know that the dog’s color, a property, is not the same thing as the dog, a substance. In the same way, formless matter (i.e., prime matter) is unobservable, even though we know that the dog’s nature, its form, is not the same thing as the prime matter that it informs. We see, touch, and smell the dog, for it is a material object, a hylomorphic substance consisting of matter and form. But we do not see, touch, and smell the dog’s matter or the dog’s form. Our mind abstracts the form and we infer the existence of prime matter.

I provide this numb nail sketch of the problem of the One and the Many and its relation to the nature of matter because it seems that Webb at points confuses the concerns about matter in the hard sciences with the questions about the nature of material objects addressed by philosophers.

In this regard, I want to make two observations, the first is about the physics and metaphysics of matter and the second is about the role of scientific theories and speculations in the philosophical assessments of the eternality of matter.

(1) *The physics of matter is not the same as the metaphysics of matter, though they at points overlap.* As I noted above, material objects seem to have certain characteristics: they exist, have extension, are subject to quantifiable measurement, are contingent, are limited to the vicissitudes of time and space, and are particulars. These characteristics tell us something of a material object's constitution (which is important to physics) and its nature (which is important to metaphysics). But the question of the One and the Many—how we account for the being and configurations of these material objects—requires a different sort of analysis, such as the metaphysical accounts offered by Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle, and later by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Thus, when Webb rightly points out that what contemporary physics teaches us about matter makes matter seem more mysterious than one may suppose (7-9), that point has no bearing whatsoever on the metaphysical analysis of matter. Whether, for example, hylomorphism is true is a metaphysical question, and thus its veracity is not affected by anything like quantum mechanics, just as providing an exhaustive scientific account of how the brain works cannot tell us whether the human person has an obligation to think rationally. The latter is a philosophical question that touches on final causality, a metaphysical category.

So when Webb asserts that “Ancient Greek philosophers, with some exceptions, argued that matter in itself (apart from the form it takes) is unknowable” (3), he does not technically err, just as one would not be inaccurate in saying that calligraphers argue that ink in itself is unknowable apart from the form it takes. For whenever one finds ink—whether in an ink well, a letter on a page, or a splotch on the carpet—it has a form. But in another sense, Webb is mistaken. For he seems to be understanding “knowable” as equivalent to direct perception. That is, because Aristotle, for example, held that prime matter cannot be directly perceived it is therefore “unknowable.” But that's not quite right. In the cases of both Aristotle and the calligrapher, prime matter and formless ink are inferences for which one has warrant, even if one cannot in principle directly perceive each. So, in this sense, prime matter and formless ink are in fact “knowable.” But in each case, the inference is possible precisely because our minds are capable of extracting the form and apprehending the universal concept (e.g., humanness, the letter “A”). But both the form and the universal concept are by their nature immaterial, for the form is not the material object that it informs and the universal concept in my mind is not the form/matter composite material object that my senses observe. So, for Aristotle the physicist, material bodies can be directly observed by the five senses. But for Aristotle the metaphysician, the form and matter of any material body are known in a different manner, even though that knowledge cannot be acquired unless one first observes the material body through sense experience. Thus, it should be clear that the “being” and the “matter” studied by the physicist are not the “being” and the “matter” studied by the metaphysician.



(2) *Scientific “just so” stories cannot in principle count against philosophical arguments against the eternity of matter.* Consider Webb’s interaction with one of the staples of some Christian apologists: the big bang theory’s evidence for a beginning of the universe. He writes:

Plenty of creedal Christian theologians have pointed to the big bang as evidence that matter has a singular point of origin, with the implication that this singular origin could conceivably point to a supernatural intervention as its basis. If so, then matter is bound by nothing but God and nothingness. In defense of the eternity of matter, Mormon apologists have responded by asking where the big bang occurred, since, if it started somewhere, there must have been something already there—even if it is just a quantum vacuum—before it began. All metaphysical arguments aside, the fact is scientists do not and cannot tell us what the singular point of origin of the universe is. Physicists speak of a singularity infinitely dense and hot, but that singularity is as far back as their theories take them, which is not all the way back to the absolute beginning of everything that exists. Physicists seem to know more about the absolute end of the cosmos than its beginnings, and critics of Mormon metaphysics like to point out that the exceeding heat of the big bang might someday, depending on the shape of the universe, fizzle out into an empty chill. (261)

Webb claims that some creedal Christian thinkers have backed away from the big bang argument and have offered fine-tuning arguments instead (though I, for the life of me, can’t think of who these thinkers could be). But these latter arguments, Webb correctly observes, have been met with resistance by critics who suggest a multiverse account of the universe’s apparent fine-tuning: “Given an infinite number of universes, skeptics say, it makes sense that at least one of them could have had the physical properties that are just right for the origin of life” (262). After pointing out the unjustified ad hoc nature of the multiverse theory, Webb suggests that “Mormon cosmology can put [these] unreasonable speculations in a new light” (262). Relying on the work of Mormon thinker Kirk Hagen, Webb writes:

Hagen agrees with the critics and skeptics who use the multiverse to reject the theistic implications of the big bang. If the multiverse is a coherent concept, then, as Hagen writes, “our big

bang is just one of many” big bangs. There might be many universes like bubbles within bubbles, each proceeding from a singularity that is not all that singular. Our universe might be one little pop in the crackle of a string of bangs. Darwinism might even help explain why some universes are successful and others are weeded out into oblivion. Multiverse theory suggests that the physical laws of each universe are local, not universal, with some laws working out better than others. Only the strong (or fit) universes survive, but with so many universes competing against each other in countless relationships, it is hard to imagine a time when none of them existed. No single universe as we now know it is eternal, but matter itself is.

Multiverse theory mitigates the uniqueness of the big bang, which is not good news for classical theism’s position on creation out of nothing, but it provides grounds for both the eternity of matter and a complex realm of growing and changing divinities. It is thus tailor-made for Mormon apologetics. More than that, Hagen considers it close to a necessary assumption for Mormon theology. “The idea of a single finite universe,” he admits, “occupied by a multitude, perhaps an infinite number, of gods and other eternal beings seems untenable.” Mormons teach that soteriology involves an eternal progression of spiritual power and knowledge. With such a strong emphasis on the destiny of every believer to become fully divine, with all the corresponding rights and privileges, perhaps Hagen is right that Mormonism simply must presuppose multiverse cosmology. If this world with its vast stretches of time and space is but a drop in a porous bucket of worlds, then there just might be multiple gods stretching back to who knows when. Multiple universes, in other words, make room for multiple gods, just as the concept of multiple gods requires multiple universes. (262-63; citation omitted)

This is all very interesting. But it’s not precisely clear how any of this counts against the sort of philosophical arguments procured against the eternality of matter. Take, for example, the kalam cosmological argument, which usually includes the big bang theory as one of the four reasons to accept its second premise: the universe began to exist. But big bang cosmology is not the strongest reason to accept that premise. Rather, it is the impossibility of traversing an infinite number of moments, which is based on a philosophical argument that does not depend on the deliverances of the hard sciences.

William Lane Craig, a champion of this argument (as well as the scientific ones),¹⁹ points out that an *infinite set* of numbers is one that is complete and cannot be added to, e.g., the infinite set of natural numbers {1,2... 10... 1,000,000...}. This set contains an *unlimited* number of members from 1 to infinity. But since an actual infinite is a *complete* set



with an infinite amount of members, the series of events in time cannot be actually infinite. This is because the series of events in time is always increasing (being added to) and one can never arrive at infinity by adding one member after another. Consider the following example.

If you were on Interstate 35 driving from Waco to Dallas with 110 miles to traverse, there is no doubt that you will eventually arrive in Dallas. However, if you were to drive on an I-35 from Waco to Dallas with an infinite number of miles to traverse, you would never arrive in Dallas. But if you did arrive in Dallas, it would only prove that the distance was not infinite. Since an infinite number is unlimited, one can never complete an infinite number of miles.²⁰

Applying this to a universe with no beginning, a certain absurdity develops: if the universe had no beginning, then every event has been preceded by an infinite number of events. But if one can never arrive at infinity by adding one member after another, one could never arrive at the present day, because to do so one would have to traverse (or complete) an infinite number of moments to arrive at the present moment. Moreland, in his defense of the kalam argument, explains:

...[S]uppose a person were to think backward through the events in the past. In reality, time and the events within it move in the other direction. But mentally he can reverse that movement and count backward farther and farther into the past. Now he will either come to a beginning or he will not. If he comes to a beginning, then the universe obviously had a beginning. But if he never could, even in principle, reach a first moment, then this means that it would be impossible to start with the present and run backward through all of the events in the history of the cosmos. Remember, if he did run through all of them, he would reach a first member of the series, and the finiteness of the past would be established. In order to avoid this conclusion, one must hold that, starting from the present, it is *impossible* to go backward through all of the events in history.

But since events really move in the other direction, this is equivalent to admitting that if there was no beginning, the past could have never been exhaustively traversed to reach the present.²¹

Consequently, the multiverse theory cannot, as Webb suggests, provide “grounds for both the eternity of matter and a complex realm of growing and changing divinities.” For if the multiverse has always existed, then it has had to traverse an infinite number of moments to reach

this present moment. Postulating multiple universes—whether an infinite or a finite number—is no answer to the problem of traversing an infinite, for as long as one claims that at least one universe has always existed, the problem remains.

Conclusion

As I noted in my introductory comments, there is so much interesting material in Webb’s book that it is impossible for any one analysis to do it justice. For this reason, I decided to focus on what I believe is the underlying assumption of his case for an embodied God: Christianity can in fact be dehellenized and still remain Christianity. The project that this assumption suggests, as I think I have shown, cannot hope to move forward unless it can adequately address at least two concerns.

First, as I argue in Part III, Webb seems to confuse the physics of matter with the metaphysics of matter. Because the questions that the classical concept of God addresses—questions about concepts such as substance, person, accident, perfection, form, essence, eternity, and so forth—are not scientific queries about the subjects studied by physicists, biologists, or chemists, Webb’s intriguing observations about the changing theories and speculations about matter in the hard sciences are simply beside the point.

And secondly, as I argue in Parts I and II, Webb does not seem to seriously entertain the possibility that “the encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance,”²² the central argument of Pope Benedict XVI’s 2006 Regensburg address. For, as the Holy Father argues, “the New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which had already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed.... [T]he fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself.”²³ So, if Benedict is correct, one can no more dehellenize Christianity than one can desemiticize Judaism.

¹(New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). All citations to this book appear in the text.

²See, e.g. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003).

³D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), 55. See also, Craig A. Allert, *A High View of Scripture: The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 48–66.



⁴Quoted in H. Leclercq, "The First Council of Nicaea," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton, 1911), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11044a.htm>.

⁵Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), <http://www.ewtn.com/faith/teachings/incac2.htm>.

⁶However, unlike Harnack, Webb sees Platonism as both a mixed-blessing and a mixed-curse:

Theologians can no more change the past than historians, which is why theology cannot simply dismiss the patristic appropriation of Neo-Platonism as an intellectual blunder. In a world where matter was frequently associated with a near-nothingness or, worse, equated with evil, the Platonic understanding of God as invisible and immaterial was a godsend for Christian theology. Defining God as immaterial let Christianity disassociate God from the miasma of matter, both its metaphysical complexity and psychological perplexity. Today, however, rethinking matter Christologically should help Christianity disassociate itself from some of the more antiincarnational aspects of the Platonic legacy. This does not mean that theologians need to set themselves to the heroic task of reversing the Platonization of Christianity. History cannot be turned back, though its consequences can be reconsidered in the light of our hopes for the future. (271)

⁷Writes Harnack:

There is indeed no single writing of the new Testament which does not betray the influence of the mode of thought and general conditions of the culture of the time which resulted from the Hellenising of the east: even the use of the Greek translation of the Old Testament attests this fact. Nay, we may go further, and say that the Gospel itself is historically unintelligible, so long as we compare it with an exclusive Judaism as yet unaffected by any foreign influence. But on the other hand, it is just as clear that, specifically, Hellenic ideas form the presuppositions neither for the Gospel itself, nor for the most important New Testament writings. It is a question rather as to a general spiritual atmosphere created by Hellenism, which above all strengthened the individual element, and with it the idea of completed personality, in itself living and responsible. (Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma, Volume I*, trans. Neil Buchanan [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1894], 49 n. 49).

⁸Writes Harnack:

The Gospel possesses properties which oppose every positive religion, because they depreciate it, and these properties form the kernel of the Gospel. . . . [I]t is the duty and the right, not only of the religious, but also of the historical estimate to distinguish between the vessel and the treasure; for the Gospel did not enter into the world as a positive statutory religion, and cannot therefore have its classic manifestation in any form of its intellectual or social types, not even in the first. It is therefore the duty of the historian of the first century of the Church, as well as that of those which follow, not to be content with fixing the changes of the Christian religion, but to examine how far the new forms were capable of defending, propagating and impressing the Gospel itself. It would probably have perished if the forms of primitive Christianity had been scrupulously maintained in the Church; but now primitive Christianity has perished in order that the Gospel might be preserved. To study this progress of the development, and fix the significance of the newly received forms for the kernel of the matter, is the last and highest task of the historian who himself lives in his subject. (Ibid., 68, 69).

⁹*Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance With the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), 1989.

¹⁰“In this dispensation we have been reminded that the bread and water are ‘the emblems of the flesh and blood of Christ’ (D & C 20:40). The emblems are symbolic and do not physically change into the actual body and blood of Christ, as is believed to be the case with the concept of transubstantiation. Though wine was originally used for sacrament in the early days of the Restoration, the Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith that it does not matter what is used for the sacrament as long as the ordinance is done with an eye single to God’s glory and in remembrance of the Savior’s body and blood sacrificed for our sins. The Lord then commanded his leaders not to purchase wine or strong drink from their enemies (D & C 27:2-3).” (“Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper,” in *LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference*, eds. Robert L. Millet, Camille Fonk Olson, Andrew C. Skinner, and Brent L. Top [Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 2011], 549-550).

¹¹St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, Q75, art6, 2nd and rev., literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920), online edition, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4075.htm>.

¹²Ibid., III, Q75, art7, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4075.htm>.

¹³J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1978), 440.

¹⁴“I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed



of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible. (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 7, as found in Jimmy Akin, ed., *The Fathers Know Best: Your Essential Guide to the Teachings of the Early Church* [San Diego: Catholic Answers, 2010], 293). “Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God.... They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes.” (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6–7, as found in Akin, *The Fathers Know Best*, 293).

¹⁵“We call this food Eucharist, and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration [that is, has received baptism] and is thereby living as Christ enjoined. For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nurtured, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus. (St. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66, as found in Akin, *The Fathers Know Best*, 293).

¹⁶“He [Paul] threatens, moreover, the stubborn and forward, and denounces them, saying, ‘Whosoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, is guilty of the body and blood of the Lord’ [1 Cor. 11:27]. All these warnings being scorned and condemned—[lapsed Christians will often take communion] before their sin is expiated, before confession has been made of their crime, before their conscience has been purged by sacrifice and by the hand of the priest, before the offense of an angry and threatening Lord has been appeased, [and so] violence is done to his body and blood; and they sin now against their Lord more with their hand and mouth than when they denied their Lord.” (St. Cyprian of Carthage, *The Lapsed* (Treatise 3) 15–16, as found in Akin, *The Fathers Know Best*, 295).

¹⁷Akin (in *The Fathers Know Best*, 292–98) provides quotes from several other early church writings.

¹⁸As Plato writes through the character of Socrates: “Heracleitus is supposed to say that all things are in motion and nothing at rest; he compares them

to the stream of a river, and says that you cannot go into the same water twice” (Plato, *Cratylus*, 402a, trans. Benjamin Jowett).

¹⁹William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (New York: MacMillan, 1979).

²⁰This is my example, not Craig’s.

²¹J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 29.

²²Pope Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections” (12 September 2006), available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.

²³Ibid.