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RESPONSE TO FRANCIS J. BECKWITH

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Frank Beckwith is one of the best theologians in the business, so it is an honor and a pleasure to engage his response to my book. Anyone who knows Frank knows that he loves a good argument, but they also know that he believes that the good of any argument must reflect the love of God. If any of my arguments about the implications of Christology for the metaphysics of matter are any good, they should be judged by that same standard.

First, Beckwith argues that I cannot choose the Bible over the Church's theology because the two are inextricably connected. Indeed, he tries to push me into a logical corner: If I accept the authority of the Bible, then I should also accept the authority of the early councils, since those very councils determined which books belong in the Bible and how those books should be read. I gladly accept this corner and do not wish to leave it. As a devout Roman Catholic, I wholeheartedly affirm both the authority of the Bible and the early creeds. Where we differ is twofold: First, I do not think that the Bible endorses or even implies the doctrine of creation out of nothing (and I think I have most contemporary biblical scholarship on my side). Second, I think that the Platonic metaphysics sometimes presupposed in the creeds can be revised without rejecting the substance of those creeds. The Council Fathers did not rule on the merits of the Stoic over the Platonic view of matter. They did not even employ "philosophical terms of art," in Beckwith's words, "that provide a conceptual framework by which we may better understand the depiction of Christ in Scripture." That makes it sound like the Councils were philosophy clubs debating the relative adequacy of various metaphysical systems. They were focused on the logic of salvation, not the nature of syllogisms. To the extent that they were interested in philosophy, they thought the Greek philosophers utterly misunderstood matter, since the ancients typically thought matter was eternal. Christian metaphysics,

then, *in any form* is already a significant revision of Platonism, and I only want to be more consistent and thorough in carrying through that revision. Besides, there is nothing in the Nicene Creed that my position contradicts or challenges in any way. On the contrary, my position helps us to understand just how it is that Jesus Christ “came down from heaven,” is “consubstantial” with us, and is “seated at the right hand of the Father.” What Jesus brought with him from heaven must be consistent with what he took back with him, and that consistency is his essential consubstantiality with us. The whole point of my book is that what it means to be human (bodies and all) is based on the eternal nature (or personhood) of the Son.

Second, Beckwith suggests that my project is suspiciously like Harnack’s. Given that I explicitly go out of my way to reject everything Harnack stood for, I don’t see the comparison (pp. 271-273). For one thing, Harnack thought Hellenistic ideas saturate scripture, while I think that scripture is no more essentially Platonic than it is essentially patriarchal. Most importantly, I agree with Beckwith that the development of Church Dogma has to be read, at least for the theologian, providentially, which is why I take pains to explain exactly why Platonism was so useful to the early Church. Theologians make mistakes, but the Holy Spirit does not. Any critique of the Greek sources of Patristic thought must demonstrate unwanted but unintended consequences of that appropriation and then show how those consequences can be avoided by re-narrating that history, rather than simply rejecting it. The Church Fathers did not pursue some non-heretical theological possibilities for very good reasons, but those reasons might not apply today and, in fact, there might be very good reasons to return to those possibilities to see if they advance further toward the truth than was hitherto suspected. Notice that nothing I advocate in my book is brand new! My project retrieves a kind of monophysitic Christology in the context of a metaphysical reconfiguration of the relationship of the spiritual the material. True, as a devout Roman Catholic I am obligated to show how the Heavenly Flesh position would not have been declared heretical had it been developed in a consistent manner in the Patristic period, but I spend many pages doing exactly that. The Church Fathers rejected a muddled version of Heavenly Flesh Christology for the right reasons, but they did not spend much time on it and there was no consensus about what it was they were really rejecting, so their reasons for rejecting it should not automatically overrule the many good reasons why we should consider accepting a better version of that Christology today.

Third, Beckwith argues that transubstantiation conveys a more materialistic theology than any of its symbolic alternatives. One of my hopes is that my book will defend just that: the material truth of transubstantiation. Beckwith thinks that metaphysical idealism of the Platonic sort provides the best explication of Eucharistic realism. He puts a brave face on this obviously unhappy coupling, but the fruit of his labor borders on both the magical and the heretical. He defends a replacement



theory (it is really very close to an annihilation or succession theory) of the change that takes place in the bread and wine. He argues that the change in transubstantiation has to do with the substantial form of the elements, not their physical material. When consecrated, the bread and wine take on a new form, which is the form of Christ's body and blood. Since, in good Platonic fashion, forms are immaterial, Beckwith says that the "change that occurs is of an immaterial sort." If nothing changes materially, however, then what we eat is exactly the same thing as ordinary bread and wine. We do not really consume the body and blood of Christ, according to Beckwith, precisely because we cannot consume a form! The only change Beckwith can imagine is an instantaneous replacement of one immaterial form with another; the result is a swap that we cannot see or sense in any way, like magic. Indeed, given Beckwith's commitment to hylomorphism, this "change" makes no difference in the bread and wine, since it does not alter their material manifestation. It is a change in name only. As a result, all that really changes is the name God gives to the elements, since in our understanding they still have the same form. Whether God sees the elements any differently after the consecration is a tricky question, since forms are always forms of something, but the bread and wine now have the form of Christ's body but none of his actual body. Beckwith's version of transubstantiation is thus a theory of a lack of change, rather than a theory of the one and true change upon which all transformation matters. I wrote my book precisely because Platonic metaphysics cannot account for how matter can become united with the divine. Matter is eternal and changeless for the Greeks; it does not have enough "existence" to convey the divine in any way, shape or form. The living bread from heaven is the very stuff of Jesus, and it was anticipated in the miracle of the manna and is offered to us in the ritual of the Eucharist. Spirit cannot be opposed to matter if the flesh of Jesus was not earthly even before the resurrection—and how could it have been earthly if Jesus gave it to his disciples in the Last Supper even before his death?¹

Permit me to make a few more remarks. The term transubstantiation was used prior to Aristotelianism was accepted in the West, and not even the Council of Trent says explicitly that only an Aristotelian interpretation of this elemental change is valid. Even among Aristotelians there is no consensus about the details of the metaphysics behind that theory. The point of any theory of the Eucharist is to explain real material change that nonetheless is unapparent to the senses. After all, the Council of Constance condemned the idea that the material substance of the bread and wine remain in the sacrament after consecration. Moreover, no less an authority on transubstantiation than Innocent III put it this way: "Although that which was bread is the body of Christ, the body of

Christ is not however something that was bread, since that which was bread is now totally other than it was; but the body of Christ is in every way that which it was."²

Taking that statement as our guide (though rejecting Innocent's conviction that the change in the incarnation is not symmetrical to the change in the Eucharist), we must immediately face another problem: how can the accidents that remain not have Christ as their subject? This is a problem because nobody should want to imagine that after the consecration Christ becomes the body of a piece of bread. Such an image is literally grotesque. If Beckwith were to try to fix his position, he would actually run smack into this problem. If the bread and wine don't change except for the fact that a new form is superimposed upon them, then either the form makes no difference (and thus nothing changes) or the bread becomes the material substance of this new substantial unity, in which case, the bread is the body of Christ. I defy Beckwith to escape this dilemma. The only way out, in face, is to explain how the accidents that remain do not have Christ as their subject, and the only way to do that is to accept the position of Scotus that the human body can have a form that is different from the soul—Scotus's *forma corporeitatis*—but that, of course, commits us to his more general position on the plurality of the forms (that there can be a plurality of forms in one existent), which constitutes a fundamental rejection of Thomistic metaphysics. Only if the (temporal) corporeal form of the bread can change at the time that the bread becomes transformed by the form of Christ's eternal body can the bread be both itself and more than itself. Only in this way can the bread participate in Christ's body without either altering Christ's body into a grotesque hybrid of elements or leaving the physical matter of the bread unaltered altogether.³ If I am right about this, then a fully realistic Eucharistic theology will have to leave behind the metaphysics that Beckwith holds so dear. To be fair to Beckwith, however, I should note that I did not have the space to go into these particular Eucharistic debates in my book, although the incarnational foundations for a new Eucharistic theory are in place there. Needless to say, I firmly believe that the incarnation, not the abstract and vague but perfectly useful term *transubstantiation*, is the only thing that can explain the Eucharist, and thus everything I say in my book about the earthly Jesus Christ is meant to apply to the Eucharist as well.

Fourth, Beckwith spells out some textbook metaphysics, but his summary is misleading or simplistic at best and wrong on some important points. There is too much to discuss here, but let me begin with prime matter. Scholars debate whether Aristotle had such a doctrine with most saying no (Aristotle thought basic matter was simply the four elements, not a prime matter beneath them, a fifth and uniting element, so to speak [see p. 35 and p. 297n 21]). Even if he believed in prime matter, it would not be the stuff that Beckwith describes. Matter for the Greeks is essentially elusive, tending toward nothing, dangerously close to being evil, and beyond any conceptualization. Prime matter is thus a doctrine



that is intended to compensate for these problems by turning a truly puzzling phenomenon (pure potentiality!) into something that we can imagine and describe. Prime matter, in fact, is a Christian attempt to turn Greek matter into something more amenable to Christian beliefs. Prime matter is a Christian attempt to go halfway to the Greeks, but it has neither philosophical coherence nor theological utility. It also has the danger of opening up the possibility of alchemical changes within matter, something that I was in pains in my book to rebut with my own view of Christological matter. Not all conversions are the same, but the possibility that grace can truly complete nature through a process of conversion that is not alchemical is the only hope we have for the resurrection (and the only viable alternative theologians can propose to emergent materialism). Beckwith is far too sanguine in depicting prime matter as an accurate concept of what matter really is. When Beckwith lists unobservable as one of the attributes of prime matter, he means that as a positive description, as if we know what something could be if it were basically nothing! For Platonists, matter is form all the way down. Calling what is left “prime,” a positive term (like prime time) is little more than wordplay. Beckwith thinks that we can make inferences to prime matter, but if so, we are inferring to whatever it is that is left when we have nothing more to know (because we know only the forms of things). This all strikes me as rather comical, and Aquinas does not help make matters any better. Aquinas might think we can know prime matter, but that is because, as a Christian, he is committed to the fact that matter is elevated to eternal truth in both the incarnation and the Eucharist.

Fifth, Beckwith says that science can have no bearing on metaphysics, but this introduces a distinction that Aristotle for one never would have accepted. Only secular atheism treats science as if it has nothing in common with metaphysics. Metaphysics is not completely immune to scientific findings. Can anyone deny that Darwinism launched a war on essentialism that has had a determining impact on modern metaphysics? Can any theologian not see that one of the tasks of contemporary theology is to argue against the attempt to make the study of living organisms a Newtonian science?⁴ Nevertheless, I am actually sympathetic to Beckwith’s position if it were put in a more subtle form: Science is dependent on metaphysics for its assumptions, but metaphysical arguments are only indirectly affected by scientific findings. Science can prompt us to rethink our arguments even if it can rarely disprove them. I should also say that I spend only a few pages discussing the way modern physics has made a mess of matter (pp. 7-9). My point in that very brief discussion is that even the best scientists do not know what matter is, and thus we need to go back to the metaphysical drawing

board. In fact, I go overboard in making light of the ways that quantum speculation has been used to promote a plethora of contradictory ideas, and so I resist drawing any specific philosophical conclusions from the developments of physics. That is why I explicitly criticize emergent materialism, which is guilty of exactly the kind of boundary blurring that Beckwith projects onto me. I should also note that I examine the multiverse argument as one plausible defense of certain Mormon beliefs; my own position explicitly rejects it (p. 267).

Sixth, and finally, Beckwith throws out the kalam cosmological argument for the absurdity of rejecting an absolute beginning of the universe. Beckwith has already noted that my book is long and full of arguments. That I did not discuss this argument is surely an omission for which my weary readers will be grateful. I do not think this argument is all that sound, but I do not think I need to bother with it either, since in fact I do not reject the absolute beginning of the universe. Everything has a beginning, I argue, but the beginning is the eternity of Christ, not a creation out of nothing. I interpret creation Christologically, and thus matter has a beginning in Jesus. Matter is eternal only in the sense that the Father creates in, by, through and for the Son. Beckwith's kalam argument is fine with me as long as he grounds it in Christology.

Finally, Beckwith says that "one can no more dehellenize Christianity than one can desemiticize Judaism." Does he really mean this? Is Plato to Christianity as the Jew is to Judaism? I would have thought that Christ, not Plato, fits that comparison. Besides, does a Stoic approach to matter constitute dehellenization? Yes, Christianity will never be done with the Greeks, but that is only because the Greeks set the terms for every philosophical debate, not because any one of them got every philosophical problem right. Need I remind Beckwith that Aquinas was almost condemned in 1277 for challenging Christianity by turning to Aristotle over Plato? The Church survived that radical revision of Platonic metaphysics, and I am sure it will survive any more revisions yet to come.

¹ There are many problems with Herbert McCabe's essay, "Transubstantiation and the Real Presence," most notably that he does not earn his conclusion that the elements need only be food (that it does not matter what kind of food they are). Nonetheless, I agree with him when he says that in the Eucharist "we have food and drink of the future world which appears as food and drink of this world," although I would want to make more of that "appearance" than he does. See McCabe, *God Matters* (New York: Continuum, 1987), 126. On the topic of manna, see the brilliant book by Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist* (New York: Doubleday, 2011).

² Quoted in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 138.



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³ If there is no form of the body other than the rational soul, and if the flesh in the tomb did not undergo putrefaction and decomposition, then the flesh of Jesus during the *triduum mortis* must have been immediately and directly connected to the Logos. But this means that during these three days the divine was united with a corpse, not a human being. That is grotesque in itself (and a challenge to the explanatory range of Chalcedonian Christology) but it also raises this question: Where did the human being go? Moreover, if Jesus' body could be preserved only by an immediate and direct assumption by the Logos, what does that say about our bodies in their resurrected state? By the way, this is just one of many topics on which Mormons have a lot to say and a lot to teach creedal Christians. See the fine discussion of the material integrity of corpses in Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is On Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2012). This superb book came out too late for me to use it in my own book.

⁴ Indeed, my own interest in the topic of the eternal significance of the body of Jesus Christ has its origin in part in my criticisms of the pretensions of Darwinism to erase teleology from the biological account of human uniqueness. See Stephen H. Webb, *The Dome of Eden: A New Solution to the Problem of Creation and Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Cascades Books, 2010). For (a celebration of!) Darwinism's continuing dependence on Newtonian assumptions, see David J. Depew and Bruce H. Weber, *Darwinism Evolving: Systems Dynamics and the Genealogy of Natural Selection* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997).