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John Bowker

A Theological Overview

—ROWAN WILLIAMS

JOHN BOWKER SHARES WITH that other great Anglican thinker Austin Farrer the twin disadvantages of being interested in too much for comfort and being congenitally independent of parties and schools in philosophy or theology. Both write out of an enormous erudition, both have no qualms about following through connections of thought even when they lead well beyond what most people would regard as intellectual comfort zones. And the unhappy result has all too often been that they are regarded with a mixture of patronizing mild praise on the one hand, and, on the other, a sort of awed reluctance to engage and argue. Both have had an impact whose depth is hard to calculate on countless individuals; but because neither is the creator of a “school,” it is hard to quantify. The fashionable and deplorable concern with measurable “impact” in the academic world of today would find it difficult to manage writers who were so ready (recklessly or generously or both) to spread their genius over such diverse fields. Both are in many ways very distinctively Anglican; both manage to produce deeply persuasive versions of classical orthodoxy almost in passing, with a few lines of radically illuminating analogy or with a single fresh concept; yet the constructive dogmatic work is offered in the most unsystematic way, embedded in a rich fabric of imaginative prose and poetic allusion. For both, the exercise

of creative imagination is inseparable from trying to think seriously about God—to *think*, not just to illustrate with apt quotation or decorative charm.

John Bowker's earliest work as writer and teacher was much concerned with pushing the envelope in the study of the Jewish elements of Christian Scripture; an early paper on Targumic forms¹ and a more sustained essay on Jesus and Pharisaism² sketched out—in ways that readers at that time could not have fully predicted—a future intellectual trajectory which would embrace a monumentally careful reading of non-Christian religious texts and traditions and also an abiding concern with locating Christology in a new way. The 1970 monograph on the theodicies of different religions was far more than a textbook listing diverse approaches to “the problem of suffering”: it conveyed, as few works in what was then still called “comparative religion” did, a full sense of the interiority of each religious world. Anyone studying this remarkable work will have emerged convinced of the need to read every tradition's reflections in the context of its prayer and poetry. One of its concluding insights is that differences between religious idioms are differences over “the nature of the joy attainable by men”³: it is a typically unexpected perception, one of those observations which radically but unobtrusively change the way in which a reader frames the issues of interfaith engagement.

And the same originality of understanding and intensity of attention are conspicuous in the Wilde Lectures given in Oxford in the early seventies on “The Sense of God.” The two books that came out of these lectures⁴ have been shamefully neglected in subsequent decades. They begin to define a quite distinctive approach to the theology of interfaith encounter (bypassing the clichés around exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism that still dominate too many introductions to the field), while also outlining a new approach to natural theology and a radical repristination of Chalcedonian Christology. Perhaps—again—because they ranged too widely for the comfort of some, and undoubtedly because they demand very close reading, they have yet to enter the mainstream of theological discussion; but to reread them now is to see how much they do to clear the ground for the revolution in religious studies that has overtaken the subject since the seventies, and to put in place the philosophical resources that are going to be needed in the face of an aggressive antireligious polemic in the last couple of decades.

1. Later appearing in *Targums*.
2. *Jesus and the Pharisees*.
3. *Problems of Suffering*, 290.
4. *Sense of God and Religious Imagination*.

Central to all of this—in a sense the key concept in a great deal of Bowker’s thinking—is the idea of “constraint.”⁵ It is an interesting choice of word: it is meant to avoid the potential crudities (and the unhelpful polysemy) of talking about causes for things. What is, is as it is because of the constraints within which it lives: it is as it is because of the pressures upon it. Every substance in the universe is a bounded system of information, and we are always as metaphysical or scientific enquirers seeking better to understand what specifies those boundaries. The pressures which do so, however, are unmanageably diverse, and we must avoid like the plague the persistent temptation to ask what the real or fundamental forms of constraint are, as if somewhere you could track down the one causal nexus that really mattered. The question of God is thus one about how far the human mind can and should go in imagining constraint: if all specific constraints are themselves constrained by a constraining context, active in and with every specific pressure at work in the universe, then at some level the “constraint” of God is what makes each element in the universe what it is—not as an extra force exercised but as the ground of intelligible convergence between all specific finite constraints; as that which makes action or energy at the same time *information*.

The classical confession of Christ’s divinity, Bowker argues, reflects a recognition that the life of Jesus of Nazareth was one in which the constraint of God’s underlying intelligent agency was uninterruptedly present in human awareness and responded to in human action: this is a life uniquely “informed” by the constraint of unconditional agency. And if this is a large and abstract claim, it is located painstakingly in an analysis of the precise kinds of challenge posed by Jesus to the religious and political consensus of the first Christian century, in which one of the focal issues was a crisis of transcendence, a systemic bafflement as to where and how divine action could be recognized.

A full summary of the discussion would not be appropriate here; but part of its brilliance and originality is—paradoxically—that it is set in the middle of a series of analyses of how religious discourses or cultures come to crisis point and how those crises are resolved. What we might call the christological solution to the problem of lost transcendence becomes more intelligible if seen in the context of a global range of crises and resolutions in the world of religious language—crises and resolutions which make it plain that communities of faith are not, as a superficial critic will claim, immune to the pressures of immediate experience and cultural fluidity. The

5. This is explored in various ways in *Sense of God*, in the introduction to *Religious Imagination*, and in *Is God a Virus?*, especially chapters 10–12 and 16–18.

question of how and when a language loses credibility and what it takes to recover that credibility is always built in to religious self-awareness. When it fades or is obscured, religions become more than usually damaging in their environments.

So, this is a natural theology which does not look to produce watertight chains of evidence but invites us to entertain a perfectly coherent model of the world's construction as a world of interlocking clusters of intelligibles, appealing to the fundamental idea of a basic constraint within—or around—all constraints. What makes religion interesting—to say the very least—is its capacity to negotiate crises of plausibility and to recover transmittable and continuous tradition, constraining individual thoughts and behaviors in turn. Of course, religions reinvent themselves—as do all traditions of thought. Once we are over the crude surprise or triumph that such a recognition brings, we can begin to grasp why religion is so perennially engaging. Credibility may falter or practically fail; yet managing that moment uncovers resources hitherto unsuspected, a deeper level at which the constraint of God's truth works.

In the light of this, Bowker can be found in the nineties and later constructing a very sophisticated response to the antireligious writings of Richard Dawkins. With the cooperation of his student, Quinton Deeley,⁶ himself a strikingly original mind, Bowker dismantles, not only the very amateur philosophy behind the scientific determinism of the “selfish-gene” generation, but much of the scientific argument itself, tracing the significantly different theories deployed simultaneously without recognition of their divergences by Dawkins and others, and returning once more to the fundamental themes of his earlier discussions of how causality insists on being read as information exchange and what this entails for the interpretation of genetic and neuroscientific research. The closer we look at the working of the human brain, the more it should be clear that we are examining a system of information processing which builds up to increasingly sophisticated and ambitious levels of receptivity; rather than reducing the operations of the brain to the reactive and recursive strategies characteristic of primitive responses—“fight or flight,” or whatever the fashionable formula may be—we have to learn to see how we become open to ever-deeper levels and kinds of “constraint.”

We do not need to appeal to these for the resolution of routine and context-specific questions; but the substantive point is that, if we do not need reference to God for sorting out local causal puzzles, identifying immediately relevant constraints, that is not a reason for assuming that such

6. Particularly in *Is God a Virus?* and *Sacred Neuron*.

reference is otiose at other levels—any more than it would be sensible to claim, say, that chemical properties could have no pertinence to biological ones, because the latter could work admirably well in resolving immediate questions about the world of life systems. But—and this is both a complicating and a simplifying qualification—the point at which reference to the ultimate constraint of God comes in is not like the opening up of a new set of causal problems and solutions: it is “the constant practice of the presence of God, of God as constraint over the outcomes of our behaviour, moving them constantly in the direction of love.”⁷

The coherence offered by reference to the constraint of God is not that of a theoretical system but that of an intelligibly ordered life which transmits the fundamental information about the nature of the ultimate constraint; which is why Christians say of Jesus Christ that he is both divine and human, in the sense that the constraint of God, the unsurpassably active character of divine love, is made “specific and continuous” in this human life without any interference in the routine causal processes that make up a human existence.⁸ The incarnation is reimagined as the continuous embodying in a human biography of the “information” of God’s way of being.⁹ Although Bowker does not draw this out, the shape of his Christology echoes the style of late patristic and early Byzantine discussion, for which the central categories were to do with how a unique mode, *tropos*, of divine life could be seen as the ultimately determining agency shaping (constraining) a human individuality.

Bowker is consistently modest in his doctrinal formulations and properly critical of any triumphalism in approaches to faiths other than Christianity; yet he speaks from an unabashedly traditional Christian base in many ways. How does this sit with his broader interests in interfaith encounter? To this question, he will not give a simple answer—chiefly because he is insistent (as the great constructive work of the midseventies shows) that no religious discourse can be effectively renewed except from its own internal critical resources: there is little point in staging arguments between traditions aimed at showing where another faith is inadequate or inconsistent. What is interesting about any discourse of faith is that it represents a continuous effort to be open to actual constraint (i.e., to what it has not itself generated or succeeded in controlling)—to truth.

7. *Is God a Virus?*, 117.

8. *Ibid.*

9. See especially *Religious Imagination*, 184–91, on constructing a modern translation of Chalcedonian Christology.

Thus the significant questions in a discourse will be about how it negotiates the challenge of sustaining continuity and identity while attending to and deploying its self-critical elements in the name of an intensified truthfulness, an intensified submission to the fundamental constraint to which it looks. This helps us see why what is deeply dangerous in religious discourse is also what is deeply positive and humane: the passion to preserve continuity, at its best a passion for distinctive and life-giving truth, may become violent and exclusive; but what we need to do is not to soften the contours of the distinctiveness but simply to become more intelligent in understanding the nature of the disagreements. Looking back to Bowker's earliest reflections, we can say that if we have a disagreement about "the nature of the joy attainable" by human beings, violent conflict and mutual threat are logically inadmissible ways of resolving this. I cannot be made to be happy in your way; yet if my own religious conviction assumes, as the major traditions do, that in some sense the holy makes for the well-being of all, a resort to violence against you will necessarily entail betraying or trivializing the basic grammar of that conviction. Not an academic point, as will readily be grasped.

It is a sophisticated and fresh approach to interfaith engagement, avoiding very effectively the banalities of those various essays in "global" religion for which the historical and specific elements in any faith are treated as embarrassing surface phenomena. I would only add—a point elaborated elsewhere—that the more serious we are about the transcendent liberty (the unconstrainedness) of the divine constraint to which we seek to attend, the less anxious we should be to defend it (as if it were vulnerable to finite assault or competition). This might connect with one of Bowker's bolder and more controversial speculations. He argues that the basic stance for interfaith engagement has to be what he calls "differentialism": we cannot find a vantage point from which to assess and grade the diverse accounts offered by religions of ultimate human fulfilment. "There may be equal outcomes of value which cannot be translated into each other."¹⁰ And if each of these outcomes is the result of a sustained effort to be obedient to the ultimate constraint of sacred truth, can we hope that God, or whatever ultimate point of reference we assume, "endorses" such outcomes? To put it differently, if God is beyond constraint, God is beyond anxiety or self-defense; and so it might be that God could or would perfect the particular happiness each tradition looks to, without some kind of insistence that all be drawn into the same fulfilment.

10. *Is God a Virus?*, 182.

But I confess to finding some difficulties with this. It is certainly true that the world's faiths are not a set of rival answers to the same questions; true also that there is no Archimedean point from which to judge, and no translation programme to render diverse accounts of human fulfilment into universal terms; true again that we cannot compel any other to accept or aspire to an alien vision of joy or fulfilment. All that being said, there is still a case for saying that, if there is supposed to be some ground for supposing universal human kinship and universal mutual obligations of a certain kind, the varieties of human joy cannot be diverse to the point of mutual contradiction or flat incompatibility. Each faith makes claims about fundamental and defining features of human identity, and, as Bowker freely allows, this entails argument—properly civil, properly attentive and open to learning, but nonetheless argument; and this surely allows us to say not simply that God “endorses” a simple variety of final ends, but that those ends need to be convergent if humanity is one.

And if so, the argument is about the point of convergence; about what will ultimately appear as the category which knits all the others together. A Christian might say that this is the hope that all human beings will find themselves caught up in the identity of the Divine Son, fulfilled in the intimate relation-without-duality that is at the heart of the Trinitarian life. A Muslim might say that the ultimate inclusive category was that of perfected obedience to divine will, a Buddhist that it was the radical abandonment of the illusion of self-subsisting ego. It is not difficult to imagine any of these saying of any of the others, “I see and value the goal you propose, but for me it has to be finally instrumental to the realizing of the goal I believe to be most basic for human subjects.” It is certainly not a zero-sum game; but there are questions about too simple a reading of the idea of a divine “endorsement” of seriously divergent human ends; and such a simple reading could in clumsy hands reinstate just those forms of mutual exclusivism that Bowker's entire work struggles to set aside.

But whatever we make of this specific point, there can be little doubt that Bowker's work lays the groundwork for a theology of religions that is substantially different from and a good deal more interesting than a lot of what has been produced under that heading. In this brief exposition of some of his recurrent concerns, I have been trying to show how the apparently centrifugal forces in his writing are in fact profoundly interlaced. The theology of religions is built on the fundamental idea of religious systems as *bounded* discourses, necessarily committed to questions about continuity and identity because of the belief that they are not humanly self-generated schemata but responses to a constraining agency as much given and

nonnegotiable as the local constraints that specify the various discourses of the sciences.

And this same basic set of principles is what allows Bowker to sketch, tantalizingly but persuasively, a reworking of Chalcedonian Christology in terms of the unrestricted human “absorption” of divine constraint. The controlling models of information theory which underlie this are an essential part of what he brings to the debate with deterministic philosophies of science; and it is no accident that in *Is God a Virus?* he moves from discussion of genetics and genetic information-carrying to a particularly rich account of what interfaith argument might be, and thence to a case-study on continuity and change in the context of the modern Church of England (analyzing arguments around the ordination of women), in which he reaffirms the crucial principle that theologically serious changes in religious discourse and practice happen when some hitherto occluded aspect of a basic set of convictions is explored afresh—in such a way that the inner logic of the scheme comes to be seen differently and new conclusions are drawn. The way in which this subject is handled in the final section of the book thus points back unmistakably to the phenomenology of internal religious revolutions spelled out in *The Religious Imagination*.

In short, the superficial impression of a theologian whose interests are simply too disparate for comfort is misleading. The point could be reinforced by reference to shorter works, more devotional in intent, or more deliberately broad-brush; but it should be clear that there is a connecting thread in the major works of scholarship and apologetic discussed here. John Bowker has never claimed to be a system builder in theology or religious studies—and in this respect too he stands close to other great Anglican figures like Farrer. But not being a system-builder is by no means the same as being an unsystematic or merely occasional thinker, a superior journalist; and what I have attempted to do very briefly in this introductory sketch is to display Bowker as a thinker who consistently addresses a tightly connected series of questions. How do religious discourses change and under what pressures? How do we make sense of that notion of a “pressure” in the first place, if we do not want to reduce it to the vague pushings and pullings of contemporary intellectual fashion? How is the vision of a world shaped by immensely complex networks of constraint fleshed out in the various discourses of the sciences?

In tackling these basic issues, John Bowker lays the foundations for reconstructing two crucially important areas of reflection, the theology of interfaith engagement and the theological response to challenges articulated by popularized science. In both these areas, it is hard not to feel that much of the theological world is still catching up with what Bowker has long

since mapped out. And the tantalizing proposals around a new vocabulary for Christology still await further and fuller exploration from other theologians: the reaffirmation of the Chalcedonian settlement in the seventies, at a time when the tide seemed to be running so strongly against a robust incarnational theology in many ways, was a characteristic bit of intellectual courage and independence; it was one of the things that helped at least some younger theologians at that time to believe that there was more to the doctrinal tradition than many leading voices were then claiming, and that this “more” had rich and significant implications for a religiously informed anthropology and a new metaphysic capable of intelligent conversation with the philosophy of science.

And all of this has also been framed within a distinctive language and style of exposition, often very complex but at the same time shot through with glimpses of personal vulnerability and personal passion. I said earlier that the broad range of poetic reference in the books is something other than decorative: it is a way of thinking. Unobtrusively, Bowker slips into many of his books poetry of his own, always moving and demanding; he refuses to write *about* “constraint” without illustrating something of what it means in the actual way the writing gets done, so that we cannot come away with any illusions about the cost of thinking under constraint. Poetry is one of the ways in which constraint is deliberately invited and intensified in human speech; so it should be no surprise to find it deployed in this context. Understanding this is to understand why Bowker’s mode of theological thinking is as important and as formative as its content; yet another point at which he touches Farrer, whose conversational, footnote-free style shows the process of ideas coming to birth rather than a polished, bullet-pointed product—yet whose sermons and meditations display a tightly-focused passion in their wording that gives a sense of near inevitability to their theological conclusions.

I do not want to overplay the parallels; Farrer and Bowker are very diverse thinkers, Farrer largely indifferent, like most of his generation, to the world or religious plurality, Bowker working at a distance from the mainstream philosophical arguments that preoccupied Farrer. Their work on biblical questions shares an interest in rabbinical exegesis, but Bowker’s contributions represent a very much more historically acute and informed hinterland as regards the cultural and linguistic detail of the field. But there are some illuminations to the comparison; perhaps most importantly, both remind us of the unhelpfulness of enclosing writers too tightly in ready-made categories (“biblical scholar,” “apologist,” “interfaith expert,” “systematician”). If Christian theology is what the greatest theologians assume it is, a genuine thinking of the range of human experience in the light of God’s

gift in Jesus, we ought to expect different areas of discourse to connect; we ought to expect the questions of one area to open out on to the questions of another. It is not by any means a uniquely Anglican affair, either: how do we place Augustine or Newman within the conventional markers of territory? But the Anglican tradition has fairly consistently acknowledged a responsibility to look for ways of conversing with its ambient culture that do not fit neatly on the map's grids, and it is one of this tradition's gifts to the wider Christian world that it has nurtured minds capable of these deceptively informal and seemingly loosely structured conversations. All this brief essay intends is to alert us to some of the ways in which deeper consistencies may be hidden, and accordingly to alert us to the risks of ignoring writers like John Bowker, who have the patience and courage to follow tracks from discipline to discipline in the faith that all these paths lead to the ultimate constraint of truth, loving, active, and unbounded intelligence.

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