

The Nature of Christian Doctrine: A Conversation with My Critics

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Abstract: This article opens with a brief account of the six main themes of *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, noting in particular the role of the early church as an ‘epistemic community’ of knowledge production, and the significant and helpful parallels between the modern scientific tool of ‘inference to the best explanation’ and early Christian attempts to identify the best overall account of the biblical witness to the identity and significance of Christ. I then respond to the helpful and insightful comments of my six critics, noting how their comments help us to move ahead discussion of early Christian doctrinal development and its contemporary significance.

It is a pleasure to be able to respond to my six colleagues who have very kindly agreed to comment on my recent book *The Nature of Christian Doctrine* (2024). I greatly appreciate this act of collegiality on their part, and the opportunities for discussion and reflection it creates. As not all readers of this special issue may be familiar with *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, it may be helpful if I first offer a brief account of the background to the writing of this book and its six central themes, before turning to explore the points helpfully raised by my critics.

One of my main concerns was to understand why Christianity saw it as being so important to develop doctrines in the first four centuries of its existence. After all, no other religion or worldview of late classical antiquity felt the need to do this. While schools of philosophy might focus on propagating the teachings of their founders, Christianity seemed more concerned with clarifying the identity of Jesus Christ, before affirming his moral and spiritual vision. And what about the significance of these doctrines today? Since they emerged in the bygone culture of late classical antiquity, can they be disregarded today?

These questions have fascinated me since I began studying theology at Oxford in the 1970s. I was a late arrival in this field, having initially studied chemistry and earned my doctorate in the biomedical sciences in Oxford’s

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Department of Biochemistry under the supervision of Professor Sir George Radda before turning to the study of theology. After joining Oxford's Faculty of Theology in 1983, I initially focused on questions relating to historical theology, leading to research monographs such as *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (1985), *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (1986) and *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (1987).¹

This intense historical research led me to reflect on the nature and function of Christian doctrine, leading to my early monograph *The Genesis of Doctrine* (1990).² This volume considered why early Christianity chose to develop doctrine as a defining category of discourse, and the implications of its historical situatedness for contemporary theological articulation.

I was not satisfied with this work, however, feeling it lacked critical engagement with two disciplines that I was coming to see were increasingly important: the history and philosophy of science, and social epistemology. After numerous false starts, an extensive 2004 conversation with the Cambridge philosopher Peter Lipton concerning the conceptual reach of 'inference to the best explanation' helped me to grasp how I might explore potential parallels between the development of scientific theories on the contrary, and the development of Christian doctrine on the other.³

Although I initially served as Oxford's Professor of Historical Theology, I was later appointed as Oxford's Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion in 2014. It was during this final phase of my Oxford career that I undertook the research leading to *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, focussing on the nature of doctrinal development, the functions of Christian doctrine and their parallels (and divergences) from scientific theories.

My interest in social epistemology, evident particularly in my 2019 monograph *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities*, arose partly through reflecting on Alasdair MacIntyre's account of 'tradition-mediated rationalities', which recognizes that social and cultural contexts play a crucial role in shaping what individuals consider to be 'rational'. This 'social turn' has focused attention on the relationship between individuals and their wider social context, calling into question allegedly universalizing accounts of human rationality and knowledge

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 4th edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

² Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

³ Our discussion focussed on the expanded second edition of Lipton's monograph on this theme, which marked a significant improvement on the first edition of 1991: Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2004). Lipton's early death in 2007 was a great loss for British philosophy.

production.⁴ As MacIntyre puts it, a ‘living tradition’ is actually ‘an historically extended, socially embodied argument’.⁵ Different ‘epistemic communities’ thus emerge, having developed their own distinct (and, in their own terms, entirely rational) accounts of what counts as ‘evidence’, and the criteria that might be articulated and applied to their forms of knowledge production.⁶

Such communities hold their own distinct set of normative and principled beliefs, based on the application of certain specific methods using shared ‘internally defined criteria for weighing and validating knowledge in the domain of their expertise’.⁷ The dispersed early Christian community of discourse is a luminous example of such an epistemic community, with its own characteristic evolved sense of its tasks, along with the resources and methods that are appropriate to these. These core working assumptions need to be uncovered by careful historical study,⁸ rather than imposed on the basis of the false assumption that there is some ‘universal’ mode of rationality that is applicable at all times and in all contexts.

This, then, is a brief outline of the backdrop against which *The Nature of Christian Doctrine* was conceived and developed. So what are its core themes? And how might these contribute to a discussion of the origins, development and functions of Christian doctrine?

The key themes of the book

The Nature of Christian Doctrine is fundamentally a positive and constructive work, building attentively and appreciatively on previous scholarship, yet going beyond it. While the work is critical at points, its fundamental concern is positive: the development of an approach that makes sense of the phenomenon of Christian doctrine, especially its development during the early church, allowing its importance for the community of faith to be appreciated. The development of doctrine is to be seen as a natural and integral aspect of the early Christian community’s quest for self-understanding and a sense of identity through a sustained and extended engagement with the apostolic tradition, mediated through Scripture and the doxological practice of the church. The book sets

⁴ For discussion, see Erik Baldwin, ‘Tradition-Based Perspectivalism’, in John M. DePoe and Tyler Dalton McNabb, eds., *Debating Christian Religious Epistemology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 191–207.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edn (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), p. 222.

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 75–92.

⁷ Peter M. Haas, *Epistemic Communities, Constructivism, and International Environmental Politics* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 5.

⁸ For an excellent example of such an approach, see Frances Young, ‘The “Mind” of Scripture: Theological Readings of the Bible in the Fathers’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), pp. 126–41.

out and explores six leading themes which are helpful in engaging the origins, development and functions of Christian doctrine.

1. Early Christianity can be considered to be a geographically and chronologically extended ‘epistemic community’, developing its own distinct views on its intellectual and moral sources, methods, norms and identity, which created conceptual space for the notion of ‘doctrine’. This approach recognizes the distinct identity of Christianity, and its obvious divergences from other ‘religious’ or ‘philosophical’ epistemic communities of late classical antiquity. The sources, norms and methods of the early Christian epistemic community emerged over time, and historical research can both uncover these patterns of development, and explore how these methodological convictions expressed themselves in the development of Christian doctrines, especially in the domain of christology. I consider this to be one of the most important aspects of the book, and since none of my critics contested this point I am even more inclined to think that it is indeed convincing.
2. The development of Christianity, both in relation to its own internal development and its complex and shifting relationship with Judaism, is best understood in terms of a process paralleling in some important respects what is now known as a ‘Paradigm Shift’ by scholars in the field of the history and philosophy of science. This is not an original observation; it was set out in some detail in 2012 by Dirk-Martin Grube, who rightly noted that the event of the resurrection precipitated such a ‘paradigm shift’, in that existing Jewish beliefs did not seem capable of accommodating it.⁹ I argue that this ‘paradigm shift’ focusses primarily on two interrelated issues: the identity of Christ, and the manner in which Christianity should read the Hebrew Bible. While Christianity was deeply rooted in Judaism, it developed new ways of reading the Scriptures of Israel, which were now understood to focus on the coming of Christ. As I note, John Webster comes close to a similar way of thinking in his important Burns Lectures of 1998. ‘Christian faith, and therefore Christian theology, emerges out of the shock of the gospel’.¹⁰ Webster here highlights the ‘comprehensive interruption of all things in Jesus Christ’, which ‘absolutely dislocates and no less absolutely reorders’ thinking about God and the meaning of life.
3. The approach that has come to be known in the philosophy of science as ‘Inference to the Best Explanation’ is an important and helpful tool in the study of doctrinal development in early Christianity. This is one of the most original and potentially significant contributions to the discussion of this

⁹ Dirk-Martin Grube, *Ostern als Paradigmenwechsel: Eine wissenschaftstheoretische Untersuchung zur Entstehung des Christentums und deren Konsequenzen für die Christologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagsgesellschaft, 2012).

¹⁰ John Webster, *The Culture of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), p. 43.

topic in *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*.¹¹ It is becoming clear that this method can be used to explore both the scientific present and the historical past.¹² My theological application of this method, familiar to philosophers of science, was prompted by Christoph Marksches's 2007 comment that patristic theologians such as the apologists, Montanists and the school of Origen seem to have 'developed their theology according to the model of a laboratory'.¹³ This metaphor was further developed by Judith Lieu and Winrich Lohr, with (in my view) some helpful outcomes.¹⁴

4. Christian doctrines are not merely propositional statements intended to inform us; they offer us a new way of beholding or 'seeing' reality, expressed by the classical Greek term *theōria*. My analysis draws on the revisionist accounts of the concept of *theōria* in Plato and Aristotle offered by recent scholarship, particularly in the work of Andrea Nightingale, professor of classics at Stanford, who emphasizes its relational and participatory dimensions,¹⁵ as well as Hans-Georg Gadamer's retrieval of the coinherence of 'theory' and 'praxis' in Aristotle's moral philosophy.¹⁶ Early Christian understandings of *theōria* are thus better understood in terms of 'contemplation' rather than detached rational dissection,¹⁷ leading to living a good life in the world, rather than just understanding that world.

¹¹ I am not suggesting that theology is a form of natural science; my point is that the thought processes that inform both theology and the natural sciences in proceeding from a cluster of particularities to the discernment of a 'big picture' or theory have some important (and instructive) parallels.

¹² For example, see its use in relation to the interpretation of archaeological evidence: Lars Fogelin, 'Inference to the Best Explanation: A Common and Effective Form of Archaeological Reasoning', *American Antiquity*, 72 (2007), pp. 603–26.

¹³ Christoph Marksches, *Kaiserzeitliche christliche Theologie und ihre Institutionen: Prolegomena zu einer Geschichte der antiken christlichen Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), pp. 380–1.

¹⁴ See, for example, Judith Lieu, 'Modeling the Second Century as the Age of the Laboratory', in James Carleton Paget and Judith Lieu, eds., *Christianity in the Second Century. Themes and Developments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 294–308.

¹⁵ Andrea Wilson Nightingale, 'On Wondering and Wandering: Theoria in Greek Philosophy and Culture', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 9 (2001), pp. 23–58; Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Praise of Theory', in his *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 16–36.

¹⁷ Carlos Steel, 'Maximus Confessor on Theory and Praxis. A Commentary on *Ambigua Ad Johannem VI* (10) 1–19', in Thomas Bénatouil and Mauro Bonazzi, eds., *Theoria, Praxis and the Contemplative Life after Plato and Aristotle* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 229–57; Bruce V. Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 158–74.

5. Doctrine has theoretical, objective and subjective aspects, which may be *distinguishable* in theory, but are not *separable* in practice. I argue that Karl Popper's framework of the 'Three Worlds', developed to cope with the complexity of a scientific engagement with the natural world, is helpful in holding these three aspects of doctrine together in a cohesive framework, allowing their mutual interaction and interplay to be explored,¹⁸ while noting how individual theologians often differ in where they choose to place their emphasis.¹⁹ This safeguards the depth and detail of the notion of doctrine, while allowing its individual elements to be articulated or applied as seems appropriate.
6. Doctrine articulates both an ontological disclosure – a *revelation* – and a coordinating epistemic framework which allows multiple elements of this disclosure to be discerned as different aspects or elements of a greater whole. It thus affirms the complexity of the larger reality that is made known in the gospel, while enabling its individual elements to be held together as parts of a greater whole, in contrast, and studied and appreciated in their own right on the other. I draw on the British public philosopher Mary Midgley's strategy of 'mapping', which has considerable potential to illuminate theological issues,²⁰ in exploring how this complexity can be both respected and articulated.

This brief summary of the approach to the origins, development and function of Christian doctrine set out in my book naturally leads us to consider the responses of my colleagues, and how these might be helpful in correcting, extending and applying its analysis. Given the emphasis I place upon the positive heuristic potential of bringing the study of early Christian doctrinal development into conversation with the philosophy of the natural sciences, it seems appropriate to begin with my reflections on the responses of science-engaged theologian Gijsbert van den Brink and the noted historian of early Christian theology Frances Young.

Gijsbert van den Brink

Gijsbert van den Brink holds the Chair of Theology and Science at the Faculty of Religion and Theology at the Free University of Amsterdam. His own research interests and publications, which demonstrate an excellent understanding of

¹⁸ For this framework, see K. R. Popper, 'Three Worlds', *Michigan Quarterly Review* 1 (1979), pp. 143–67. I developed Popper's approach in an earlier monograph, considering the interconnection of theoretical, objective and affective approaches to nature: Alister E. McGrath, *Natural Philosophy: On Retrieving a Lost Disciplinary Imaginary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 130–65.

¹⁹ Alister E. McGrath, 'Place, History, and Incarnation: On the Subjective Aspects of Christology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 75 (2022), pp. 137–47.

²⁰ See my analysis in Alister E. McGrath, 'The Owl of Minerva: Reflections on the Theological Significance of Mary Midgley', *Heythrop Journal* 61 (2020), pp. 852–64.

core issues relating to the scientific method and the philosophy of science, make him an ideal commentator on critically important aspects of my approach to the emergence of Christian doctrine, and I was delighted that he was willing to undertake this task. While he offers some important affirmations of several core themes of my approach to doctrine, he also makes some informed criticisms of *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, and some helpful observations on the ‘expansion and application’ of my approach.

I will begin by noting briefly the points at which van den Brink affirms my approach, before moving on to consider his concerns and criticisms. He commends my approach as ‘a wonderfully rich and multifaceted account of the development of Christian doctrine’, which is able to offer a ‘much more historically truthful characterization’ of early Christian doctrinal development than traditional ‘static models of preservation’ of an early orthodoxy or Walter Bauer’s account of the suppression of early orthodoxies and the imposition of alternatives.

I also appreciated van den Brink’s emphasis on my view that doctrine is to be seen as a ‘construction’ – a human act of discernment and interpretation, which is not arbitrary but guided and informed by the evidence. In the early 2000s, I explored the potential of analogies for doctrinal development drawn from the world of evolutionary biology.²¹ Although this project was illuminating in some ways, I realized there was a fundamental problem with such purely biological approaches – their failure to give due weight to human *agency* in doctrinal formulation and development. A persuasive case can certainly be made for some form of ‘organic’ continuity between the New Testament and the formulations of the Council of Chalcedon (451).²² Yet this is not a purely organic process comparable to an oak tree growing from an acorn. It is my hope that the account of doctrinal development offered in *The Nature of Christian Doctrine* can illuminate how both the development and evaluation of doctrinal models involve human agency, both individual and social, without compromising the notion of divine guidance of this process of reflection and development.

So what concerns does van den Brink raise? Limits on space make it necessary to be somewhat selective in dealing with these, and I will try to address those which seem to me to be particularly relevant to the project in question.

The first point raised by van den Brink concerns how we are to understand the term ‘doctrine’. As he rightly observes, I do not offer a precise definition, and seem to oscillate between a number of understandings of the notion. The reason for my irritating ‘back-and-forth between the singular (“Christian doctrine”)

²¹ Alister E McGrath, ‘The Evolution of Doctrine? A Critical Examination of the Theological Validity of Biological Models of Doctrinal Development’, in *The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 117–67.

²² See, for example, Morna D. Hooker, ‘Chalcedon and the New Testament’, in Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin, eds., *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 73–93.

and the plural (“doctrines”) is that I saw myself as having a scholarly obligation to ‘save the phenomena’ by respecting the diversity of use that I observed in the historical evidence rather than eliminate or minimize this through theoretical interpretation. I have my own ideas about how doctrine *ought* to be understood; yet there is an obvious danger of retrojecting my own understanding of this matter onto my reading of the historical sources, and thus offering a reading of the writings of this period which is skewed by my own prejudices.

Particularly in the Latin west, the term ‘doctrine’ is used in at least two major senses – both as a body of beliefs (‘Christian doctrine’), and as individual beliefs about specific topics (such as ‘the doctrine of grace’).²³ I appreciate that this attentiveness to the historical details, though understandable, will be frustrating for some of my readers. The heuristic device of distinguishing doctrine as an aggregated or integrated body of doctrines from individual doctrines, though unquestionably useful, nevertheless represents an interpretation (rather than a neutral summary) of the evidence.

Van den Brink has a second concern, about my use of the philosophy of science in a theological context. This ‘strategy raises the suspicion of leaning heavily on what might be called the “softer” sides of science’ while ‘ignoring its harder parts such as its robust procedures of testing hypotheses by trial and error and its strict adherence to methodological naturalism’. Surely I am being inconsistent here, and might ‘inadvertently lend credence to scientism’? It is a fair and entirely legitimate concern.

In responding, I would gently question the idea that there is a single ‘scientific method’ which can be applied consistently across all empirical disciplines. This flawed notion of a ‘singular scientific method’ fails to appreciate the methodological diversity that is so clearly observed and practiced within and across the natural sciences.²⁴ As John Habgood pointed out, ‘the natural sciences are not defined by some ‘nebulous entity called the scientific method’, but rather by ‘general criteria of attention of evidence, and critical and consistent thought’.²⁵ These epistemological virtues are not exclusive to the natural

²³ In Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana*, we also find the term *doctrina* used to mean ‘teaching’ as a professional ministerial activity within the church, or in the more theological sense of God’s means of teaching divine truth to human beings, alongside the more general use of the term to refer to individual doctrines, such as the incarnation. This is particularly clear in Book 4, in which Augustine reflects on the *modus proferendi* – the rhetorical means by which Scripture can be communicated to an audience. It is also evident in the Prolog, which tends to interpret *doctrina* as the practice of teaching and learning within the church.

²⁴ Important studies of this point include Jan Golinski, ‘Is It Time to Forget Science? Reflections on Singular Science and Its History’, *Osiris* 27 (2012), pp. 19–36; Henry M. Cowles, *The Scientific Method: An Evolution of Thinking from Darwin to Dewey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). Cowles argues that this stereotype of the scientific method is due to John Dewey’s influential book *How We Think* (1910).

²⁵ John S. Habgood, *Theology and the Sciences* (London: The Atheneum, 1998), p. 4.

sciences, but also extend to the human sciences, even if their mode of application might be different.²⁶

I think it is also necessary to query the notion of a ‘strict adherence to methodological naturalism’ as an integral aspect of the scientific method. I prefer to suggest that the natural sciences take the common position that nothing is to be believed unless there are good warrants for doing so. A good example of this is the Nobel Laureate Roger Penrose, who clearly goes beyond the limits of ‘methodological naturalism’ in affirming the existence of a transcendent realm on the basis of his interpretation of the role of mathematics in explaining the successes of the natural sciences.²⁷ Penrose argues that we need to expand our concept of ‘real existence’, refusing to limit this to physical objects by including mathematical structures which seem to exist before they are discovered.²⁸ Each ‘science’ has its own distinct understanding of the nature of evidence, procedures of investigation and criteria of true knowledge which are appropriate to its ‘epistemic community’, and its location on the spectrum of knowledge. Scientism – which both van den Brink and I regard as flawed in terms of its controlling assumptions and outcomes – arises partly through a failure to recognize how research *tasks* shape research *methods*.

Finally, I need to note van den Brink’s concern about one aspect of the proposed analogy between scientific theories and Christian doctrine – the *provisionality* of the former. So are doctrines also provisional? In one sense, this is clearly the case. To speak of ‘doctrinal development’ implies the move from a good to a better mode of doctrinal formulation. Early Christian attempts to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity are best seen as important steps along the way to a fuller understanding of this doctrine that subsequently emerged.

In the natural sciences, theory change often occurs through new evidence that calls existing theories – or even paradigms – into question. In Christian theology, the critical question concerns the identity and significance of Christ. Yet we do not have full access to or direct knowledge of the history of Christ in the same way as a natural scientist can observe the world or conduct experiments on natural objects. As is often pointed out, the gospel accounts of Christ weave together historical narration and theological interpretation, in such a way that these cannot be disentangled.

²⁶ Although I do not make much use of the distinction between *Verstehen* and *Erklären* in this volume, I deploy it to make the kind of points van den Brink considers to be important in another volume I published recently; see Alister McGrath, *Why We Believe: Finding Meaning in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Oneworld, 2025), pp. 42–3.

²⁷ Mark Steiner, ‘Penrose and Platonism’, in Emily Grosholz and Herbert Breger, eds., *The Growth of Mathematical Knowledge* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000), pp. 133–41.

²⁸ Roger Penrose, *The Emperor’s New Mind: Concerning Computers, Minds, and the Laws of Physics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. xii.

What we can do (and what I have tried to do, in a limited manner, in this volume) is to reconstruct the patterns of evidential reasoning and theoretical argument that appear to have led to the broad doctrinal conclusions that gained ascendancy within early Christianity, leading to their Christological and Trinitarian conclusions. I personally found this enterprise very rewarding. Yet van den Brink's question remains important. I often wonder whether we can hope to secure final closure on some of these important discussions,²⁹ even if we can feel we have given reliable holding answers.

Frances Young

Frances Young (University of Birmingham) is one of the most distinguished historians of early Christian thought, who has recently published a magisterial two-volume account of the complex interaction of Scripture and doctrine during this formative period.³⁰ To my chagrin, these two volumes were not available to me in early 2023 as I completed the text of *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*; I have now had the pleasure of devouring these in their totality, admiring the range and depth of her scholarship and wishing that I had been able to use these in my own analysis. Young's earlier *IJST* article 'The Mind of Scripture' was a major influence on my thinking,³¹ particularly in its emphasis on the importance of discerning the *dianoia* or 'overall sense or unified aim of Scripture' within early Christian theology.

As Young points out, there are significant similarities between our approaches and conclusions, not least our shared emphasis on the critically important role of Scripture in precipitating, shaping and guiding the process of doctrinal development. 'We clearly have a common concern to re-frame doctrinal development in terms of discourse and debate rather than a process of Hellenization (Harnack) or inevitable (providential?) evolution (Newman)'. This means that doctrinal development can be reframed as a 'communal attempt to grasp the overall implications of scripture and liturgical experience in a way that is true to what has been given'. Young's view that doctrine is to be seen as the 'articulation of Scripture's overall meaning', serving as a 'Christian in-language' which attempted to set out a coherent and communally acceptable account of Christian identity and beliefs resonates strongly with my own intuitive sense of what many early Christian writers were doing.³² I also especially appreciated the way in which she framed the importance of liturgical or doxological considerations for doctrinal development, noting that 'what had been received from the apostles' involved both theological ideas and doxological practices.

²⁹ David Wiggins, *Meaning, Truth, and the Limits of Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 129–63.

³⁰ Frances M. Young, *Scripture, the Genesis of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023); Frances M. Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute: Doctrine and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024).

³¹ Young, 'The "Mind" of Scripture'.

³² Young, *Scripture, The Genesis of Doctrine*, p. 244.

Young is ideally placed to evaluate my proposal for seeing the emergence of Christian doctrine in terms of a geographically and chronologically extended communal quest to find the ‘best explanation’ of the biblical witness and Christian liturgical experience. Her considered reaction to this approach is favorable: ‘to me it immediately rings true’. Although I express some cautionary comments in *The Nature of Christian Doctrine* about its approach being possibly perceived as the imposition of a modern way of thinking on late classical antiquity, Young does not consider this to be a difficulty. ‘The ancient interest in rhetoric, language and logic means that a process of searching for the right discourse, or “best fit” propositions, is entirely appropriate to what they thought they were doing’.

Young found that her ‘deep immersion in texts such Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses* or Athanasius’ *Contra Arianos* and *De Decretis* supports this perspective’. My own engagement with two of these texts as I researched this volume (Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses* or Athanasius’ *Contra Arianos*) lacks the depth and penetrative insight of Young’s, but it seemed to me that interpreting their implicit methodology as a form of ‘inference to the best explanation’ brought clarity to their arguments, particularly their criticism of the Gnostic or Arian alternatives to their positions as contrived or unnatural.

So what of my suggestion that we consider doctrine to be a form of *theōria*, in the classical Greek sense of this term? Young welcomes this proposal, noting that it enables ‘the re-marriage of doctrine with spirituality, with affective and liturgical experience, not to mention ethics and lifestyle’. These, as she rightly observed, have been disconnected by the rationalizing agendas of modernity; their reconnection is both appropriate and necessary. ‘Doctrine, as the communally held *theōria* of, we might say, life, the universe and everything, has the capacity to fire the contemplative imagination, generate poetry, and above all, deepen prayer’. Indeed, Young concludes her own magisterial account of the relation of Scripture and doctrine in early Christianity by making much the same point: ‘For Augustine, as for the fathers more generally, there were none of our splits between doctrine and contemplation, scripture and prayer, action and reflection, theology and worship’.³³ Young is also positive about the potential of the philosopher Mary Midgley’s concept of ‘mapping’ in coordinating multiple facets of complex phenomena, helpfully comparing this with her own approach to holding together the multiple elements of the New Testament’s interpretations of the cross.³⁴

There are points at which Young disagrees with me, although she generously presents this as a divergence in our approaches, noting that the two of us ‘have different starting-points – differing scholarly contexts, differing purposes which engender different, yet ultimately complementary, discussions’. For example, Young is more concerned with the historical material relating to doctrine, where I tend to explore aspects of contemporary discussions. Yet it is clear that there

³³ Young, *Scripture in Doctrinal Dispute*, p. 305.

³⁴ See Frances Young, *Construing the Cross: Type, Sign, Symbol, Word, Action* (London: SPCK, 2016).

is room for both our approaches – Young’s rigorously historical approach, and my own quarrying of the historical tradition – to inform and enrich our understanding of the nature and functions of doctrine, especially in articulating a distinct Christian identity.

In the final sections of her discussion, Young sets out something of her vision for developing an account of how contemporary theological articulation would benefit from ‘receiving from the doctrinal inheritance and finding ways to re-express it in new languages, new cultural forms, new contexts’. This involves both the coordination of a rich range of theological metaphors, and the retrieval of narrative as a natural mode of theological articulation. I for one will look forward to seeing the fruits of this labour!

Arnold Huijgen

Arnold Huijgen (Protestant Theological University Utrecht) offers a critical and engaging account of my approach to doctrine, which makes some important points. I very much appreciated the care with which he read my book, and identified some questions that need further discussion. A significant theme in his response focusses on the potential vulnerability of my approach to scientism, in that the ‘language employed, such as the distinction between observations and theory, fits in a modern positivist discourse on science, rather than in the context of Christian faith’. Huijgen here raises some important issues concerning the disciplinary integrity of theology. In particular, he questions whether my interest in the natural science might inadvertently allow or encourage the intrusion of scientism into my theological analysis?

I recognize the importance of this question, and try to avoid this problem. In *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, I take up the notion of an ‘epistemic community’, characterized by its own distinct understanding of how knowledge is acquired, assessed and advanced. The Christian church is one such epistemic community; a scientific research group is another. Yet there is a further significant difference between the theological and scientific communities: each epistemic community develops its own distinct *language* to communicate its findings and express its core beliefs. As a theologian and a former scientific researcher, I have become epistemically *bilingual*. But there is no way in which the language of one epistemic community can be used by another without the risk of serious misunderstanding and miscommunication.³⁵

As Amy Lee points out, recognizing that theology and the natural sciences use different languages allows us to see these ‘not as abstract systems of thought but as specific discourses taking place in the lives of individuals and

³⁵ For an excellent account of the issues, see Amy H. Lee, ‘Science and Religion as Languages: Understanding the Science-Religion Relationship Using Metaphors, Analogies, and Models’, *Zygon* 54 (2019), pp. 880–908.

communities'.³⁶ There is no 'universal language' that can be used in every context and situation; we have to learn to live and work with specific languages, recognizing their distinct characteristics.

That is the dilemma I faced in writing this book. As a citizen of two distinct 'epistemic communities', with ongoing relations with both, I am aware of how easily mistranslations can arise in conversations across disciplinary boundaries. Yet throughout this work, I have tried to avoid prioritizing the language and conceptualities of either 'epistemic community', aiming rather to speak across their boundaries on a topic that I believe is enriched by cross-disciplinary conversations, despite the terminological and conceptual divergences that have to be recognized.

As is well known, it is often the case that two epistemic communities use the same term, but interpret it in quite different ways. As I suggest in *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, the term 'theory' might be a good example of this – the scientific use of this word differs significantly from the way it is used theologically, especially in writers such as Maximus Confessor. Yet useful comparisons are still possible between these divergent conceptions.

One of the core themes of *The Nature of Christian Doctrine* is that the study of the development of scientific theories, particularly the methodology of 'inference to the best explanation', is theologically helpful and enriching. Both Huijgen and I admire the Cambridge theologian Simeon Zahl's 2015 study on the 'Affective Salience of Doctrines', which we both reference in our discussions. Zahl here makes some important connections between Christian experience and the work of the Holy Spirit, focussing on actual life as embodied existence.³⁷ I cite this work, along with Zahl's fuller discussion of the issues in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (2020), in my discussion of the subjective aspects of doctrine.³⁸

Huijgen tells us that Zahl 'coined' the term 'affective salience'. Zahl himself, however, makes it clear that he has *adopted* this term from academic psychological research, referencing an important empirical study in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*: "Affective salience" is a term drawn from the discipline of psychology, where an object of our attention is understood to be "affectively salient" to the degree that it evokes and brings to awareness particular bodily affective states'.³⁹ This is clearly an empirically-grounded scientific concept.

³⁶ Lee, 'Science and Religion as Languages', p. 905.

³⁷ Simeon Zahl, 'On the Affective Salience of Doctrines', *Modern Theology* 31 (2015), pp. 428–44.

³⁸ Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). For my own appreciative use of Zahl, see McGrath, *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 54–5; 78; 94–5.

³⁹ Zahl, 'On the Affective Salience of Doctrines', p. 431. Note Zahl's reference (n. 10) to what he considers to be a reliable account of this concept: Adam T. Biggs, Ryan D. Kreager, Bradley S. Gibson, Michael Villano, and Charles R. Crowell, 'Semantic and Affective Salience: The Role of Meaning and Preference in Attentional Capture and Disengagement', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 38 (2012), pp. 531–41.

What Zahl does in this important article is to take the psychological distinction between ‘semantic salience’ and ‘affective salience’, and make some helpful theological connections. A concept derived from the ‘epistemic community’ of experimental psychology is thus shown to have theological utility and value, illuminating comparable tasks in another epistemic domain. Zahl’s wise and responsible engagement with this theme allows its importance for theological reflection on human experience to be appreciated, without leading to the intrusion of scientism in the theological domain. And that is what I aimed to do as well – for example, in arguing that the method of ‘Inference to the Best Explanation’, originally developed within an empirical culture, has the potential to illuminate our understanding of the development of early Christian doctrine, when used responsibly by a skilled practitioner who is familiar with the worlds of these two distinct ‘epistemic communities’.

Finally, Huijgen picks up the image of the ‘early church as a laboratory, in which various conceptualizations of the mystery of Jesus Christ were tested, and in which significant progress was made’. One of Huijgen’s concerns is whether the analogy of a ‘theological laboratory’ will connect well with my readers. ‘The downside of the metaphor of a laboratory is its abstract nature, its place away from ordinary life, where ideas are tested in an environment as neutral as possible’.

This is a fair point. Yet the image of a theological laboratory is imaginatively engaging, and might well be seen as accessible and engaging to a contemporary readership. This is certainly suggested by the title of the Spanish translation of my *Nature of Christian Doctrine*. The editors at Editiones Sigueme in Salamanca replaced my original main title with this: *The Laboratory of Faith*.⁴⁰ The publishers clearly felt this image of a ‘laboratory of faith’ was sufficiently familiar and accessible to help gain a wider readership for this work.

Yet Huijgen’s concern goes beyond the potentially abstract nature of this analogy; it might also be misleading, in that it suggests a clinical detachment, a ‘neutral’ culture of inquiry rather than the committed culture found in the churches and catechetical schools of early Christianity, which ‘test not merely the ideas, but also the life they engender’.

I take his point. Yet I would interpret the analogy of an early Christian theological ‘laboratory’ in a rather different way. For 3 years, I was a member of one of Oxford University’s most successful scientific research groups, directed by George Radda, based in the Department of Biochemistry. Of course our laboratories were full of scientific equipment; yet what was really important was the collegiality of a group of researchers, committed to shared tasks, working together to advance knowledge and understanding through mutual engagement and reflection on the design of experiments and their interpretation. For me, the

⁴⁰ Alister McGrath, *El Laboratorio de la Fe* (Salamanca: Editiones Sigueme, 2025).

heart of the ‘laboratory’ analogy is a corporate culture of knowledge development – a communal attempt to advance knowledge and understanding through critical review of existing approaches and paradigms, and developing new investigative proposals to enable further advancement. This, I think, helps account for the forms and directions of the development of early Christian doctrine, as well as reaffirming the importance of such collegial discussions for theology today.

Knut Alfsvåg

In his critique of my approach to doctrine, Knut Alfsvåg (VID Specialized University, Stavanger, Norway) suggests that it is essentially pragmatist in nature, relying on utilitarian approaches to theory choice influenced by Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914) and William James (1842–1910). Alfsvåg is quite right to suggest that I refer to both Peirce and James in the course of my analysis, and it is worth looking at those references in more detail to clarify my relationship to Peirce and James in *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*.

I refer to Peirce – but without citing him – in my reflections on ‘inference to the best explanation’,⁴¹ noting Peirce’s ‘abductive’ approach, among others. Later in the work, I note that something similar to Peirce’s approach can be seen underlying Athanasius’s reflections on the *dianoia* of Scripture, while making the point that this basic methodology is itself rooted in Aristotle’s account of induction.⁴² Yet I do not use Peirce as a dialog partner or resource in my reflections on the nature of Christian doctrine in this volume, despite the fact that others have studied his potential utility for this discussion.⁴³

So what about William James? Alfsvåg rightly observes that I refer to James’s famous remark that pragmatism was ‘just a new name for some old ways of thinking’ – but this does not amount to an advocacy of pragmatism on my part. I note James’s point in my discussion of how aspects of Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a ‘paradigm shift’ are anticipated in Aristotle.⁴⁴ As I point out, Kuhn’s ‘paradigm shift’ can similarly be seen as a ‘new name for some old ways of thinking’. Yet this represents neither an engagement with, nor an endorsement of, James’s pragmatism.

I also reference James’s famous illustration of the affective and imaginative consequences of religious conversion.⁴⁵ Yet my discussion here is not linked to James’s pragmatism, but rather to his reflections in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) on the difference that religious belief makes to individuals,

⁴¹ McGrath, *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, p. v, n.3; p. 35, n. 31.

⁴² Jorge Alejandro Flórez, ‘Peirce’s Theory of the Origin of Abduction in Aristotle’, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 50 (2014), pp. 265–80.

⁴³ For example, see Andrew Hollingsworth, ‘Towards a Doctrinal Pragmatism: Charles S. Peirce and the Nature of Doctrine’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 64 (2022), pp. 207–28.

⁴⁴ McGrath, *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, p. 7, n. 35.

⁴⁵ McGrath, *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, p. 16.

based on autobiographical testimonies. James's point is that conversion often leads people to see the world in new ways. This is an important point, and it is often discussed in theological accounts of the interaction of 'metaphysics and experience', such as that provided by my Oxford colleague Mark Wynn.⁴⁶ It was clearly important to include this point in my discussion of the role of Christian doctrine, in that James is an important witness to the religious transformation of our vision of reality.

Alfsvåg correctly notes that I do not 'discuss pragmatism in *The Nature of Christian Doctrine* beyond short references to central concepts like abduction, inference, discovery and justification'. In part, this reflects the fact that I do not consider myself to be a pragmatist, and don't use a pragmatist lens for interpreting theological history. I am aware of the importance of the recent 'turn to practice' within the philosophy of science,⁴⁷ which often leads to an emphasis on how science is actually carried out as an analytical and constructive enterprise – but this needs to be distinguished from classical pragmatism. Yet perhaps more importantly, I do not consider that the four 'central concepts' noted by Alfsvåg are distinctively and uniquely 'pragmatist', but are rather part of the intellectual toolkit of anyone trying to make sense of the world of experience and observation, alert to the difficulties in moving seamlessly from empirical observation to metaphysical truth. My reading of Peirce is that he argues that we are justified in believing that the entities implicated in our 'best' theory *exist* and the principles implied are *true*.⁴⁸

It is possible that I misled Alfsvåg by this statement: 'Yet these criteria [of theory choice] are not "givens", established on the basis of some universalized metaphysical theory; they rather *emerged* during the course of scientific practice, in that they were seen to be indicators of successful theories'.⁴⁹ My point here is that there is no agreed secure metaphysical basis *for these specific criteria of theory choice*; I was not intending to suggest the absence of a metaphysical reality within or beyond our universe, which gives meaning and value to life. One of my working assumptions in *The Nature of Christian Doctrine* is that Christianity gives us knowledge of and access to a transcendent reality, a theme which I develop in many of my other works, particularly those dealing with apologetics. In matters of science and theology, I am a metaphysical realist – even if I engage in dialog with many who do not share

⁴⁶ Mark R. Wynn, *Spiritual Traditions and the Virtues: Living between Heaven and Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 63–97.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Xu Zhu and Wu Tong, *Returning to Scientific Practice: A New Reflection on Philosophy of Science* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 13–81.

⁴⁸ I agree here with the analysis of Cheryl Misak, 'Peirce and Ramsey: Truth, Pragmatism, and Inference to the Best Explanation', in Kevin McCain and Ted Poston, eds., *Best Explanations: New Essays on Inference to the Best Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 25–38.

⁴⁹ McGrath, *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, p. 43.

this viewpoint, yet whose analyses can illuminate a metaphysically realist approach.

Yet I want to take Alfvåg's theological concerns about the possible neglect of metaphysics in the quest for the best theory seriously, as there is a legitimate concern here, which may be shared by other readers of my work. I can see a way ahead which might be more acceptable to Alfvåg, and might well appeal to a wider constituency concerned about the improper intrusion of scientism or purely utilitarian criteria of theory assessment in theology.

Gilbert Harman's landmark article on 'Inference to the Best Explanation' was published in 1965, and created a surge of interest in both philosophical and scientific communities about how to develop and assess scientific theories.⁵⁰ Yet 8 years earlier, the literary scholar and public intellectual Owen Barfield published what is widely regarded as one of his best works: *Saving the Appearances*.⁵¹ Barfield, basing himself on a participatory metaphysic, argued for the need to construct a 'model' of the universe which convincingly incorporated or subsumed our many observations and experiences, and helped people understand how they fit in to the cosmos. For Barfield, the Renaissance witnessed a 'new theory of the nature of theory' – namely, that 'if a hypothesis saves all the appearances, it is identical with truth'.⁵²

One of the most appreciative readers of Barfield's *Saving the Appearances* was C. S. Lewis, whose final work *The Discarded Image* (1964) drew on Barfield's ideas to explore the structure and appeal of the 'model of the universe' that dominated the Middle Ages and Renaissance.⁵³ This model, Lewis argued, provided a metaphysically-grounded means of framing human existence which enabled human beings to discern order, meaning and purpose in life. Although Barfield and Lewis both use an approach that parallels the quest for a 'best explanation' in science, their account of such an approach recognizes the need for a metaphysical interpretation of the universe that encourages human participation within its structures.⁵⁴

This might be a possible way ahead for scholars such as Alfvåg, who are concerned at the metaphysical disengagement and performative functionality of scientific theories, and the perception that they offer pragmatic accounts of the

⁵⁰ Gilbert Harman, 'The Inference to the Best Explanation', *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), pp. 88–95.

⁵¹ Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957). For a good discussion of Barfield's metaphysics, see Jeffrey Hipolito, *Owen Barfield's Poetic Philosophy: Meaning and Imagination* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), pp. 75–105.

⁵² Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p. 52.

⁵³ C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 16.

⁵⁴ For details of Lewis's use of Barfield, see my forthcoming work *Science and Religion in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis: Searching for the Best Model of the Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, to be published in 2026).

cosmos that are inattentive to metaphysical and existential concerns. Lewis's close friend Austin Farrer pointed out that Lewis inhabited and explored 'a Christian universe which could be both thought and felt',⁵⁵ connecting with both the affective and cognitive aspects of life. The 'model' of the universe that Lewis develops, drawing on Barfield's account of 'saving the phenomena', creates conceptual space for the discussion of metaphysical, moral and existential issues, and can, I believe, easily be extended to address the nature and functions of Christian doctrine.

Mark W. Elliott

Mark Elliott (Wycliffe College, Toronto) offers a critical assessment of *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, along with a constructive response. I read this with interest, as Elliott and I clearly have significant overlapping domains of interest, and I valued the critical remarks that he offers. (Although I haven't space to engage this, I particularly appreciated his reflections on my understanding of Albrecht Ritschl's relating of 'justification' and 'reconciliation'.) After an opening 'list of quibbles', Elliott gets down to some of the big questions under review in this work. He notes my view that Orthodoxy is '*constructed* from the apostolic witness rather than being given in that tradition, emerging through testing, debating, and challenging multiple doctrinal possibilities for acceptance'. While Elliott considers that this might be preferable to Bauer's 'suppression model', he suggests that it fails to do justice to early Christianity's emphasis on 'the given and established "truths"' of the apostolic *paradosis*. I understand the point here, but I see the situation in a somewhat different way. Let me explain.

Early Christian writers were deeply biblical in their approach to theology; yet the Gnostic controversy of the second century helped bring out the point that it was not enough to *repeat* what Scripture said; after all, the Gnostics did much the same, while interpreting those same biblical passages *within a different conceptual framework*, thus leading to a skewed interpretation which Irenaeus considered to mark a significant deviation from orthodoxy. Irenaeus and other writers of this formative age realized that biblical texts needed interpretation⁵⁶; and the best way of safeguarding an orthodox Christian interpretation of those texts was to discern their *hypothesis*, their vision of the underlying metaphysical and historical realities – and then to interpret those texts on the basis of this controlling assumption.

I speak of the 'construction' of orthodox doctrine, not in the sense of inventing something or inappropriately complexifying a simple gospel, but rather

⁵⁵ Austin Farrer, *The Brink of Mystery* (London: SPCK, 1976), p. 46.

⁵⁶ For the contemporary significance of this point, see John M. G. Barclay, 'Interpretation, Not Repetition: Reflections on Bultmann as a Theological Reader of Paul', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9 (2015), pp. 201–9.

in terms of discerning something deeper beneath the surface of Scripture which, once grasped, enables the identification and preservation of the authentically Christian meaning of these texts. The issue is not the mere repetition of biblical texts; it is the quest for the best theological interpretation of those texts, linked to the discernment of the true ‘big picture’ that lies within, behind or beyond them.

Elliott is concerned that my explorations of the role of doctrine in demarcating ecclesial communities involves a diminution of the notion of doctrine ‘as that which leads and sticks close to the truth’. Again, I understand his concern. Elliott is quite right to insist that doctrine is a truth-telling enterprise. My point, however, is that doctrines which seek to articulate the truth often come to perform certain historically contingent social functions that are *additional to* (and usually independent of) their truth-telling, and do not displace this critical function. As sociologists have helped us to see, the development of markers of communal difference is an integral aspect of the human tendency towards tribalism. As an intellectual historian concerned with the social impact of Christian doctrine, it seemed appropriate to reflect on this issue in relation to ecumenical discussions, which often ignore or misunderstand this important theme.

I can see why Elliott dislikes the ‘deafening’ silence of my book concerning sin. Yet my particular concern for the development of doctrine in the early Christian period required that I focus on articulations of the identity and significance of Christ. My discussion of salvation as a core ‘benefit of Christ’ does indeed accentuate the positive aspects of Christ’s saving work, as I attempted to show how a good ‘theory’ can enfold and coordinate multiple models of salvation; yet it is, I think, clear that any account of *salvation* is attended by an accompanying or resulting understanding of *what we need to be saved from*. There are, sadly, limits to what can be discussed within the limited space of a work of this kind.

Elliott also expressed concern about my concluding suggestion that doctrine ‘should not be taught as verbal formulae to be memorized, but as the articulation of a grand and transformative vision of reality’. The context to my reflections here is the phenomenon of the ‘deconstruction’ of belief, which is leading many to leave the churches in recent years. My conversations with those who have experienced this ‘deconstruction’ suggest that this often arises through a growing sense that Christian belief is detached from ‘real life’, becoming little more than verbal formulae without any connection with a greater reality. This seems to be linked with a failure in Christian pedagogy, several forms of which focus on a purely rational formulation and defence of doctrinal themes, which neglects their affective and moral aspects and thus impoverish their rich biblical associations and overtones.

What I propose is a reconnection between doctrine, Christian experience and the life of faith, similar to that articulated by Puritan writers and their modern successors, such as J. I. Packer.⁵⁷ In the concluding sections of his

⁵⁷ See here especially J. I. Packer, ‘An Introduction to Systematic Spirituality’, *Crux* 26 (1990), pp. 2–8.

piece, Elliot points to Simeon Zahl as someone who has made such connections, focusing on the role of the Holy Spirit. I agree with him on the merits of Zahl's approach, which I consider to be consistent with (though clearly not identical to) the approach I set out in *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, and which offers at least a partial solution to the 'deconstruction' concern I noted in the previous paragraph. It seems to me that Elliot, Zahl and I have a shared concern to ensure there is a secure link between Christian doctrine, the life of faith and the world of experience, and I certainly propose to reflect further on this in future writings, aided in no small way by this helpful conversation.

Tomas Bokedal

Finally, I turn to the critical reflections of Tomas Bokedal (NLA University College, Bergen), a scholar whose scholarly expertise focusses on the interface of New Testament studies and early Christianity – a key focus of *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*. Although his comments are broadly supportive of my approach, he makes some wise and judicious comments at points of significance. I especially appreciated his reflections on synchronic and diachronic approaches to reading the canon of Scripture, which I did not engage adequately in my analysis, and is clearly of ongoing theological importance.

Bokedal opens by considering my reflections on George Lindbeck's approach to doctrine, particularly as this is set out in his *Nature of Doctrine* (1984). Lindbeck actually plays a somewhat peripheral role in my discussion, and I devote only nine pages of the work to considering him. A lot has happened in the last 40 years, and the discussion has moved on. My dissatisfaction with Lindbeck's approach was a major stimulus to the development of this book, in that I felt Lindbeck was inattentive to the specifics of early Christian doctrinal development. Bokedal rightly notes that there are indeed points at which Lindbeck engages the general issue of doctrinal development. My assessment of Lindbeck's engagement with this theme was that his approach lacked sustained empathetic intellectual engagement with the writers of the early Christian age, particularly in discerning the specific strategies they proposed in conceptualizing and assessing doctrinal formulations. This is, of course, understandable, as Lindbeck's concerns in *The Nature of Doctrine* are primarily ecumenical, where mine are historico-theological.⁵⁸

I concur with Bokedal that John Webster offers us some important insights into the emergence and functionality of early Christian doctrine that are valuable at both the historical and theological levels, and regret that limits

⁵⁸ As noted by Mike Higton, 'Reconstructing *The Nature of Doctrine*', *Modern Theology* 30 (2014), pp. 1–31.

on space prevented me from developing his insights more thoroughly. However, it is appropriate to register a concern at this point. If we consider that Webster's account of 'theological theology' is driven by a 'consistent concern to register the ontological and epistemological priority of God in relation to the activities of the knowing subject',⁵⁹ where does this rigorously theological viewpoint create or allow space for human agency, whether on the part of individual theologians (such as Irenaeus) or the community of faith in the development of doctrine?

My concern is that this approach is resistant to the notion of 'doctrinal development', in that this involves the individual and corporate reflections of 'knowing subjects' on Scripture, even if one allows that these are somehow guided by God.⁶⁰ As I argue in *The Nature of Christian Doctrine*, social epistemology illuminates important aspects of the process of doctrinal development, in that it helps us understand how epistemic communities shape their social and intellectual identities, supplementing – rather than displacing – a theological understanding of the issues involved.

The main focus of Bokedal's response concerns the historical emergence and theological significance of the 'rule of faith' in relation to the development and formulation of early Christian doctrines, rightly suggesting that my analysis would have been improved by a more extensive engagement with this notion. I concur. One of the many frustrations of theological research is the historical situatedness of the enterprise, which often limits the resources at our disposal. Earlier, I noted my frustration that Frances Young's brilliant two-volume analysis of the mutual coinherence of Scripture and doctrine was not available to me as I was developing my own ideas; I felt much the same sense of chagrin when I read Wolfram Kinzig's magisterial account of credal formation, which appeared in the same year as my own work,⁶¹ noting his judicious framing of the concept of a 'rule of faith' as a means of integrating 'homological building blocks' into a coherent framework. Bokedal is right; my analysis would have benefitted considerably at points by an informed and explicit engagement with this point, and I will ensure that this is enacted in my subsequent work in this field.

⁵⁹ Jordan Senner, *John Webster: The Shape and Development of His Theology*. (London: T&T Clark, 2022), pp. 155–85 (155).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Emil Brunner's important reflections on the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, not as a divine 'given' but as an appropriate formulation or articulation of the biblical *kerygma*: Emil Brunner, *Die christliche Lehre von Gott*, 4th edn (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), p. 209. For comment, see Alister E. McGrath, *Emil Brunner: A Reappraisal* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 234–7.

⁶¹ Wolfram Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2024), pp. 80–120.

Conclusion

Let me end by reiterating my thanks to my conversation partners and the editors of this special edition of *IJST* for giving me the opportunity to listen to some critics of my approach and learn from them. Limits of space have, I fear, prevented me from doing full justice to their points. However, I can assure them that I have listened carefully and learned from them. There is clearly growing scholarly interest in the nature and purpose of Christian doctrine, and my hope is that this conversation may help stimulate further discussion of this theologically fascinating and ecclesially important theme. It is nice to think that my book makes some interesting and helpful points; it is, however, only one small stepping stone on the way to finding a coherent and compelling account of the origins, nature and significance of Christian doctrine.

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.