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Crossing the Threshold to Eternity: The Legacy of William James Abraham (1947–2021)

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Abstract: William James Abraham (1947–2021) has made important contributions to a variety of different areas within both theology and the philosophy of religion generally. His sudden passing prompted *Holiness* to offer a review of the major themes which crop up in his writings. As a result, the present article surveys key aspects of his work, including a discussion of his most recent theological proposals.

Keywords: *Canonical Theism • Methodism • Methodist Theology • William Abraham • Epistemology • Analytic Theology*

Introduction

The death of William James Abraham (1947–2021) has been felt in circles Methodists can scarcely imagine. His ecumenical impact may be glimpsed in the tributes offered at his remembrance service, where Orthodox, Pentecostal, Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic Christians bade him farewell.[1] It can also be discerned in the level of engagement given to his thought by scholars from a variety of backgrounds and traditions.[2] Here I will attempt to offer a review of the major themes which crop up in his works. I will therefore try (and likely fail) to do justice to Abraham's theological and philosophical legacy by first introducing some of the central dimensions of his work, Ecumenical and philosophical before proceeding to a discussion of his more recent theological proposals.

Biographical Introduction

Born in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, on 19 December 1947, Abraham did not have an easy start to life. The death of his father, a farmer and day labourer, when Abraham was still a toddler left the task of raising him and his five brothers to his mother. However, the local Methodist church was very present in its pastoral care, which included gifts of money, clothing and even shoes. The church also gave his mother welcome relief when she sent this band of brothers off, on a single bicycle – 'one on the handlebars, one on the bar, one on the seat and one on the outer nuts

1 'Billy Abraham Memorial Service - October 30th, 2021' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHLAWZHAbdo (accessed 1.10.2022). Also see: 'William James Abraham Tribute - Celtic Fire (1947-2021)' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgXjE2tlfK8 (accessed 1.10.2022).

2 For example see: William J. Abraham, *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

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of the rear wheel' – to its Sunday school. A gifted child, at the age of eleven Abraham was admitted to Portora Royal Grammar School (a school whose alumni included figures such as Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, and many others). From there he went on to take a BA in philosophy at Queen's University (Belfast), an MDiv at Asbury Theological Seminary (Kentucky) and a PhD in the 'logic of historical enquiry' at Oxford University.[3]

While his academic development, particularly his love for philosophy, continued to grow over time, his Christian pilgrimage was far less smooth. By his mid-teens Abraham became an atheist because, philosophically, he could not 'conceive of the reality of God.' However, ever so gradually he began to work through these difficulties and became immersed in both the Bible and the life and writings of John Wesley, whose peculiar evangelical-Catholic synthesis 'opened up a lane in to the classical Christian tradition.'[4] Despite this newfound faith, his voracious engagement with philosophy (Kant, Hume and many others) often stripped his faith to its very core. Providentially, he maintained that Asbury firmly rooted him in his Christian faith.[5]

After the completion of his doctoral studies at Oxford he pastored churches in Glencairn, a 'heavy drinking' working-class suburb of Belfast (1977-1978), Irvinestown (1978-1980) and Cullybackey (1982-1984).[6] This period of pastoral ministry intersected with a return to academic work at Seattle Pacific University, where he taught theology (1980-1982) and published his first major works before settling permanently into academia at Southern Methodist University in Dallas (1985).[7] This interplay, between pastoral and university ministries, played an important part in his formation as a lecturer and, over the years, his students benefited greatly from this.[8] Moreover, his connection with the real world, serving the Lord in difficult pastoral settings, only served to enrich his academic work.[9]

Abraham was a controversialist. He never shied away from a theological argument. Those unaccustomed to his work may think, on turning the pages, that they had entered a pub in one of the rougher parts of Belfast. His arguments could be pointed and he never pulled his punches when he felt the truth of the gospel was at stake.[10] However, whether or not one agrees or disagrees with some of the more divisive subjects with which he readily engaged, I want to put it to the reader that they allow themselves to set these questions aside for a moment in order to enable those who might know Abraham's name but have not actually read his work to encounter the profound contribution that his ecumenical, philosophical and theological thought makes to the life of the church today.

An Ecumenical Heart: Canonical Theism

Imagine visiting Ireland with a map of the United Kingdom. Think of a time (before Google) in which you are entirely dependent, for all you know about Ireland, on that which is delineated on this UK map. The problem here is that the map only contains information about Northern Ireland. As a result you know nothing, from the map, about anywhere in the south. Now imagine that you concluded from this that you would only trust the information on the map – regardless of what you saw with your eyes, regardless of the people you met, regardless of anything else; you determined that this map would be your sole guide. On this basis you would clearly have a faulty view of Ireland. Indeed, the absurd presupposition of a criteria like this would cut you off from the great beauty of the Emerald Isle. However, if you embraced not only the map, but all the sights, smells, and people that you encountered, you would have a much richer view of Ireland as a whole. William Abraham's vision of Christianity is a lot like this.[11]

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[3] His doctoral studies were supervised by Basil Mitchell, an important philosopher of religion and Newman commentator. Abraham narrates that the first year of his doctoral studies at Oxford were spent roaming all over the university 'relishing lectures in everything' (Wittgenstein, Sociology, Archaeology) before he 'finally settled into work on the logic of historical enquiry' – spending '60% of his time' in the Bodleian library.' William James Abraham Tribute, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgXjE2tlfK8 (Accessed 1.10.2022); William J Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, 4 vols. (Oxford: University Press, 2017-2021), III:86. William J Abraham, 'Faraway Fields Are Green,' *God and the Philosophers*, ed. T. Morris (Oxford: University Press, 1994), 162-165.

[4] Abraham, 'Faraway Fields Are Green,' 166-171.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] He spent a further year (1984-1985) in Seattle before moving to Perkins. Following his retirement he was asked to start a new seminary in Baylor (2020-21) where there is now an '*Abraham* Chair in Wesleyan Studies.'

[8] Like Saint John Henry Newman, it seems he considered the work of a lecturer to be a pastoral office.
He always replied to email enquiries from students interested in his work – even admitting that he was wrong if they found an inconsistency in his thought. For further comparison see: Roderick Strange, 'Newman the Pastor,' *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011), 255-63.

[9] Paul L. Gavrilyuk, 'In Memoriam: William James Abraham (1947–2021)', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (2022), 11-14.

[10] The following illustrates how the common perception of Abraham fails to appreciate the depth of his character: Bridget Anderson, 'Worthy Opponents: Susanne Scholz and Billy Abraham' https://blog.smu.edu/perkins/worthy-opponents-susanne-scholz-and-billy-abraham/ (Accessed 17.1.2023)

[11] William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2006), 30-31.

Forged in Northern Ireland,[12] Abraham's soul possessed a deep faith in God and his writings offer us a vantage point from which we may obtain an expansive, opulent view of the Christian faith. His dynamic concept of a 'canonical theism' resists calls to limit Christianity to the confines of narrow presupposed criteria (including *sola scriptura*).[13] This leads him to broaden his attention away from focusing only on the Scriptures so as to include the entire canonical heritage of the Church prior to the schism between East and West (1054 AD).[14] Thus, in addition to the treasure of the Scriptures, Abraham highlights the way in which the undivided church of antiquity identified a broad catalogue of material including creeds, the Fathers, liturgies, icons and much, much more. This rich canonical heritage should not be viewed, as it so often has been, as epistemological criteria.[15] On the contrary, in identifying these canonical materials, he maintains that the church sought to provide believers with the resources necessary to live the Christian life. Thus for Abraham, the Scriptures are not an epistemological foundation (upon which we erect theology). He writes:

> The drive to get the epistemology right and to show that we are in the right and the other fellow in the wrong is intimately related to the divisions that break out in the church over time.[16]

Abraham interprets these terrible divisions in the church as having an epistemological root. Highlighting particularly the division between Protestants and Catholics, Abraham maintains that the basic problem is that they 'failed' to reach a consensus about what they believed to be the epistemological role played by Scripture and tradition and, tragically, 'took to killing one another.'[17] Abraham thus concludes that it is this epistemological conception of the canon of Scripture (of the canonical heritage in general) that is the root cause of schism in the church.[18]

Abraham takes a totally different approach. He believes epistemological conceptions of the Bible to be 'bankrupt' and instead views the Scriptures as a means of grace, its treasures daily food for our hearts and minds.[19] He writes:

> The sacraments, the scriptures, the creed, the canon of the Fathers, and the like, I am suggesting, were construed as materials and practices which fed the soul, which mediated the life of God, which returned human beings to their true destiny as children of God, and which ultimately led to a life of sanctity. Alternatively we might say that they were seen as gifts of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, intended to bring about participation in the life of God through the working of the same spirit, who guided the church in their selection and use … as medicine to heal the sickness of the world.[20]

Abraham believed these canons, when understood correctly, can bring about renewal and revival in the church.[21] If we stop limiting ourselves to one or another of them, and embrace the whole catalogue of materials identified by the early church, we will have all the resources needed to immerse believers into the life of God. This vision of the church is profoundly ecumenical at its heart. Indeed, Abraham dreamt of a day in which all the churches would put aside their differences and reunite around these canons. He considers that all ecumenical discussions and indeed all theological enquiry should commence from here. In sum, we come together on the basis of that which was agreed by the church Catholic prior to the great schism.[22]

Abraham's canonical theism is groundbreaking, but it is also important to acknowledge that there are a number of difficulties facing this proposal. One of the challenges for a canonical theism is that (lamentably) it remains, thus far,

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12 Abraham, 'Faraway Fields Are Green,' 162; William J. Abraham, *Shaking Hands with the Devil: The Intersection of Terrorism and Theology* (Dallas, TX: Highland Loch Press, 2013).

13 William J Abraham, 'Saving Souls in the Twenty-First Century' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (2003), 6-20, at 19.

14 For a powerful discussion of the difficulty in making the scriptures the sole (theological/epistemological) criterion of all Christian doctrine see: *William J. Abraham, The Bible*: *Beyond the Impasse* (Dallas, TX: Highland Loch, 2012), 64.

15 William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion, From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 53, 112; Abraham, *Crossing*, 16; 34.

16 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:20.

17 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:20-21.

18 For an extended discussion see: Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*.

19 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:21

20 Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 112.

21 For further discussion on this point see: William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 172.

22 This resonates with the position taken by Pope Benedict XV (prior to his ascendency to the Papacy). For further discussion see: Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 198-199; William J. Abraham, ed. *Canonical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

a 'paper religion'.[23] For example, how might this proposal relate concretely to Abraham's own Methodist tradition?[24] Moreover, though he is excessively critical of the Anglican tradition, it is apparent that, historically, a natural parallel exists between canonical theism and the Oxford Movement, which sought to bring about renewal within the Church of England using a very similar strategy during the nineteenth century.[25] Indeed, Catholic commentators have argued that he writes them off too quickly, maintaining that, were he to give more attention to Saint John Henry Newman's work, he might possibly have found a way for his proposals to be integrated into 'Roman Catholicism.'[26] However, while acknowledging the real challenges facing canonical theism, it seems this proposal genuinely has the potential to bring about renewal and even unity in the church.

A Philosophical Mind: The Epistemology of Theology

Abraham's general theological and ecclesiological orientation leads him to take a distinctive epistemological position.[27] Here it is helpful for us to recall the illustration offered at the beginning of this essay, which highlighted the folly of limiting our knowledge of Ireland (north and south) to a map (only containing Northern Ireland) of the UK. Therefore, instead of limiting our knowledge of God to narrow (presupposed) epistemological criteria, Abraham takes what has been called a particularist[28] approach to epistemology, beginning with (1) particular knowledge claims and then (2) evaluating their validity:

> [It] has long been the claim … in epistemology [that] you cannot know if any proposition is true unless you [first] have the correct method or criterion for determining what is true. Of course, you then have to find the right [meta-criterion] second-order method to determine this first-order method, and on and on *ad infinitum*. Particularists, by contrast, begin with particular assertions they find to be true and work dialectically to figure out relevant and appropriate methods of inquiry.[29]

Therefore, in contrast to theological reductionists, who would narrow the canonical heritage of the Church catholic to the confines of a presupposed criteria, Abraham begins instead with the faith of the church (canonical theism)[30] and then, retrospectively, explores the most suitable way to measure its validity:

> I want to explore a network of basic observations on the logic of canonical theism that brings into sharp relief the particular insights that relate to the justification of canonical theism. I want to identify features of what is on offer so that we shall have an appropriate sense of the kinds of considerations that are relevant to its truth or falsehood.[31]

His aim here is to expose/uncover the 'epistemic suggestions' which 'lie below the surface of canonical theism.'[32] This then presents another area in which Abraham's writing has made an important contribution in that it has inspired the creation of a new sub-discipline – the 'epistemology of theology' – to explore what constitutes 'appropriate' epistemological evaluation in theology.

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[23] For further discussion see: Daniel Pratt Morris-Chapman, 'Canon, criterion and circularity: An analysis of the epistemology of canonical theism,' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74 (2018): 1-9.

[24] For a possible application of this proposal for renewal in relation to British Methodism see: Daniel Pratt Morris-Chapman, *Whither Methodist Theology Now* (Portsmouth: Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, 2010).

[25] For an extended comparison of these writers see: Daniel Pratt Morris Chapman, *Newman in the Story of Philosophy: The Philosophical Legacy of John Henry Newman* (Eugene, OR.: Pickwick, 2021), 190-240.

[26] Matthew Levering, 'William Abraham and St. Thomas Aquinas,' *New Blackfriars* 88 (2007), 46–55.

[27] Abraham, *Crossing*, 14, 30.

[28] The phrase 'epistemological particularism' was first coined by Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee, WI.: Aquinas Papers, 1973), 3. His doctoral student, Ernest Sosa, summarises the position well: 'Which should come first: a method or set of criteria for determining when we have a bit of knowledge, or particular examples of knowledge, in terms of which we can determine criteria? Those who give pre-eminence to method or criteria may be called [epistemological] methodists, and those who give pre-eminence to particular examples (e.g., my knowledge that I have two hands) may be called [epistemological] particularists.' Ernest Sosa, 'The Foundations of Foundationalism,' *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology*, ed. E. Sosa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 149-64, at 158.

[29] William J. Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017-2021), III:12-13fn7.

[30] The faith of the undivided church of antiquity until the schism between East and West (1054 AD).

[31] Abraham, *Crossing*, 41.

[32] Abraham, *Crossing*, 51.

In a manner which resonates profoundly with Saint John Henry Newman's theological use of Aristotle's work,[33] Abraham maintains that the 'subject matter of a discipline determines' the way in which it should be evaluated. For example, 'history is about the past and natural science is about the natural order,' however, 'you do not figure out how to cure cancer in the same way you figure out why World War I happened.' Put simply, each discipline has its own internal grammar or logic.[34] Theology is no different. However, even though 'empirically' the 'default position for most people [globally] is that they believe in God,' theologians are expected to begin their work with an epistemological defence of theology. Thus, while 'historians assume that there is a past' to interpret, and 'natural scientists assume that there is a natural order' theologians are expected to carry out an extra epistemological work before they even begin to do theology.[35] Though he believes this situation to be intellectually unfair, Abraham does not shy away from this epistemological task. He does however believe that it should be taken up separately, in order to allow systematic theology to actually get on with talking about God.

In a landmark text published in this field, *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology* (2017), Abraham writes:

> It has been commonplace in epistemology … to explore in detail the epistemology of particular academic disciplines. The epistemology of science, for example, has received the lion's share of interest; but attention has also been given to mathematics, history, aesthetics, and ethics. The crucial warrant for these later developments goes back to Aristotle's insistence … [that] we should fit our epistemic evaluations in an appropriate way to the subject matter under investigation. As a result, we do not expect historical claims to be evaluated by the kind of arguments that would apply to mathematics and the natural sciences. Surprisingly – given the attention directed to theological claims and the wealth of materials in both theology and philosophy – this principle has not been systematically explored in the case of theology [...] By epistemology of theology, we mean a critical enquiry of appropriate epistemic concepts and theories in or related to theology. This involves examining and articulating what counts as appropriate epistemic evaluation in theology. The wide-ranging nature of this kind of enquiry can be seen in the following distinction. On the one hand [it] focuses on standard epistemic concepts that are usually thought of as questions about norms and sources of theology (e.g. reason; experience; tradition; scripture; revelation). On the other hand, it explores some general epistemic concepts that can be related to theology.[36]

Inspired particularly by John Henry Newman's use of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*,[37] Abraham maintains that when exploring the epistemology of any subject it is necessary to attend carefully to the subject at hand (i.e., theology) and to allow that subject to inform the kinds of considerations that 'should be brought to bear on the rationality of the issue under review.'[38] Thus, if one begins with a commitment to Christian faith, it is important to assess the rationality of its claims in a sensitive manner – allowing particular features of the subject to affect the way in which it is evaluated. In sum, Abraham believes that to engage in the epistemology of theology is: (1) to begin with a robust vision of faith and (2) to retrospectively assess its rationality in an appropriate way.

What is distinctive in Abraham's approach to theological epistemology is that his orientation is diametrically opposed to that taken by many other philosophers of religion who begin with a general theory of rationality and justification and then apply this criterion to theism.[39] In precisely the reverse order, Abraham (1) starts with theism and (2) then evaluates its rationality. Moreover, in relation to the latter (2) his approach is particularly shaped by Aristotle:

> With Aristotle I have insisted that we should accept the principle of appropriate epistemic fit. We should let the subject matter in hand shape what kinds of considerations should be brought to bear on the rationality of the issue under review.[40]

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[33] For an extended discussion of Abraham's philosophical connection to Newman, see: Pratt Morris Chapman, *Newman in the Story of Philosophy*, 190-240.

[34] If the reader believes they smell a parallel with Wittgenstein here they may benefit from reading William Alston's essay on language games: William Alston, 'Taking the Curse of Language Games: A Realist Account of Doxastic Practices' *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, eds. T Tessin, M von der Ruhr (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 16-31.

[35] Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, iii:24

[36] William J Abraham & Fred Aquino, 'Introduction', in W. Abraham & F. Aquino (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–8, at p.1

[37] Pratt Morris-Chapman, *Newman in the Story of Philosophy*, 190ff.

[38] Abraham, *Crossing*, 29.

[39] Abraham, *Crossing*, 6-12.

[40] Abraham, *Crossing*, 29.

Thus, as it would be folly to evaluate good poetry with quadratic equations, Abraham believes theologians should examine the validity of their claims in a manner appropriate to the subject in hand. In a manner analogous to Newman, who used this principle to exhibit what he believed to be the intrinsic logic undergirding Christian history,[41] a survey of Abraham's earlier publications illustrates that he applies the same Aristotelian principle to a whole host of related subjects, in order to discern *The Logic of Evangelism* (1989),[42] *The Logic of Renewal* (2003),[43] the epistemology of theology (2006)[44] and even the logic of the church (2010).[45] As a result, Abraham's work offers the church an innovative approach to the epistemology of theology and indeed Christianity in general.[46]

At this juncture it is important to highlight that there are a whole host of other possibilities here that were not explored by Abraham before he was taken from us. For example, given the depth of his ecumenical vision, it is unfortunate that he had not yet applied the concept of Aristotelian epistemic fit more fully to the subject of ecumenical dialogue. With regard to the latter, it would be interesting to see how this epistemological principle might be used in uncovering a 'logic' of unity between, say, Methodists and Catholics.[47] This potentially would offer a fruitful field of enquiry. Similar points may be made concerning theological reflection and cross-cultural mission. Though he published extensively on the subject of theology and evangelism, the absence of this theme in the bulk of his writings is tempered only slightly in his final publication, a volume on analytic theology that will be discussed below.[48]

Speaking of God: Abraham's Contribution to Analytic Theology

As a theologian Abraham is firmly committed to the project of analytic theology. Indeed, his keynote address, as a part of the first symposium explicitly[49] held on the subject (2009),[50] is frequently cited by commentators seeking to offer a definition of this theological approach:

> Analytic theology can usefully be defined [as] systematic theology attuned to the development of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy. It is the articulation of the central themes of Christian teaching illuminated by the best insights of analytic philosophy.[51]

Implicit within the extract above is the particularist orientation highlighted in the previous section. Put simply, Abraham believes that the tools of analytic philosophy should be used as a handmaiden. Abraham believes that theology should begin from within the church, from a commitment to the faith of the church contained in the canonical heritage.[52] This 'declarative' orientation has been influential within analytic theology and is embraced by writers integral to this tradition (Oliver Crisp, Thomas McCall, Bruce Marshall and others) who

41 For further discussion see: John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: J Toovey, 1845), 39; 139; Abraham, *Logic of Renewal*, 166.

42 He writes: 'I plan to delineate the contours of an ongoing research program that could well constitute the beginnings of a new field within the discipline of theology.' William J Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 2.

43 Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal*, 8.

44 Abraham, *Crossing*, 28fn6.

45 William J. Abraham, 'Church' *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Philosophical Theology*, ed. C. Taliaferro & C. Meister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 170–82.

46 The title of many of his publications illustrates his wide-ranging (particularist) application of these epistemological tools: William J. Abraham, 'Epistemological Significance of the Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit,' *Faith and Philosophy* (1990) 434–450; William J. Abraham, 'Loyal Opposition and the Epistemology of Conscience' *Asbury Theological Journal* 56.1 (2001) 135–47; William J. Abraham, 'The Epistemology of Conversion,' *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition*, eds. K. Collins & J. Tyson, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 175–94; William J. Abraham, *Aldersgate and Athens: John Wesley and the Foundations of Religious Belief*
(Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

47 For further discussion see: Daniel Pratt Morris-Chapman, 'Newman, Wesley and the Logic of Unity: An Inductive Ecumenism,' https://www.prounione.it/en/events/28-apr-2022/ (28.4.2022).

48 Immediately before he passed, I had organised to meet Prof Abraham in order to discuss a research proposal of this nature with him. I really wish I had gotten the chance to speak with him and to meet him in person.

49 This analytic approach to theology is anticipated in a volume published during the nineteen fifties that was edited by Abraham's doctoral supervisor. For further discussion see: Basil Mitchel, ed. *Faith and Logic* (London: George Allen, 1958).

50 William J. Abraham, 'Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology' *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, eds. O. Crisp & M. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 54–69, at 54.

51 Oliver D. Crisp, *The Nature and Promise of Analytic Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 33; Abraham, 'Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,' 54-5.

52 Abraham, 'Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,' 54-55.

believe that it should be viewed as a manifestation of a 'longstanding practice within the Christian theological tradition' encapsulated by the phrase: faith seeking understanding.[53] While Michael Rea's *Voices from the Edge: Centring Marginalized Perspectives in Analytic Theology* (2020) signals that the influence of this 'declarative' *modus operandi* is on the wane, those grappling with these questions will continue to find Abraham's work illuminating.[54] In this regard, Abraham's presentation of the central issues at stake, in the very first article of the inaugural edition of the *Journal of Analytic Theology*, 'Turning Philosophical Water into Theological Wine' (2013), will be an important text in debates concerning the fundamental orientation of this subject for years to come.[55]

At this juncture it is important to acknowledge a possible criticism, which immediately jumps out to those unacquainted with Abraham's epistemological work. Indeed, it might be assumed that he jumps the gun, 'plunging … straight into the content of Christian theology' without first offering a justification of the validity of theological truth claims.[56] However, as was indicated above, he does not consider that theology should begin with a 'Prolegomenon' which deals with these epistemological issues. Indeed, he believes that the history of theology (particularly modern theology) has well-illustrated the danger of this approach.[57] Essentially, his contention is that, when theology is contoured by a particular epistemology, 'crucial theological claims are systematically ignored.'[58] In effect, to begin with narrow, unproven (epistemological) rules, which predetermine what constitutes theological knowledge, leaves theology at the 'mercy' of arbitrary epistemological criteria. Indeed, he considers that, as a result of this approach, theologians have 'become so consumed with epistemological issues' that they never even begin to do theology proper.[59] Nevertheless, those seeking to begin with criteria for knowledge, in a manner typical of modern theology, may struggle with Abraham's approach. However, when the epistemological stakes are laid bare, it seems one has to begin by assuming something somewhere along the line.[60] Thus, it seems that those who begin with criteria beg the question just as much as those who begin with knowledge. Aside from outright scepticism,[61] there are few other options available to us.[62]

Divine Action and Theology

Having introduced his basic approach to analytic theology, I want to highlight a key feature of Abraham's approach to analytic theology: his focus upon divine action. Essentially, he defines theology as reflection upon 'what God has done' which he considers to be an apt 'description for theology proper.'[63] He writes,

> What emerges when we stand inside the canonical heritage of the church and seek to indicate the fundamental category in play when we think and speak of God. Nothing less than construing God as an agent is sufficiently felicitous. I would say exactly the same about the doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, I think that one advantage of thinking about God as an agent is precisely that the concept of agent is a sufficiently open enough concept to be stretched to include a Tri-Personal Agent who is the object of our adoration and service. [64]

[53] Oliver D. Crisp, *The Nature and Promise of Analytic Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 24; Thomas McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 161-162; Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999). For further discussion: James Arcadi, 'Analytic Theology as Declarative Theology,' *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* (2016), 1-16.

[54] For further discussion see: Michael Rea, ed. *Voices from the Edge: Centring Marginalized Perspectives in Analytic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[55] Abraham maintains that analytic theology is not about being 'philosophical theologians' so much as being theologians who use 'philosophy in a fruitful manner.' While Abraham is by no means the only theologian who takes this declarative approach, his robust vision of God, coupled with the epistemological rigor of his work, means that a key aspect of his legacy may be that of enabling analytic theology to maintain this course, in what he terms 'the tradition of Saint Basil,' in future. For further discussion see: William J. Abraham, 'Turning Philosophical Water into Theological Wine,' *Journal of Analytic Theology* 1 (2013), 1–16.

[56] Abraham, 'Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,' 66-67.

[57] Abraham, *Crossing*, 6-8. For an extended discussion see: Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*.

[58] Abraham, *Crossing*, 9.

[59] Abraham, *Crossing*, 9.

[60] For further discussion see: Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion*, 3.

[61] Pyrronhism offers an example of this: Richard Hankinson, 'Pyrrhonism,' *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig (London: Routledge, 2002), 727–728.

[62] For further discussion see: Roderick Chisholm, 'Sextus Empiricus and Modem Empiricism.' Philosophy of Science 8 (1941) 371–384.

[63] Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, I:110.

[64] Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, IV:20.

The subjects of Divine and Human action were of interest to Abraham from the time he was an undergraduate at Belfast, where he won the Peele prize for an essay on human action.[65] The title of his doctoral dissertation, 'Divine Action and History' (1977), examined this theme further.[66] These themes are also explored in relation to the Scriptures in *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (1981) and *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (1982).[67] However, it was not until his last major work, a tetralogy on *Divine Agency and Divine Action* (2017-21), that Abraham offered a comprehensive analysis of divine action in the scriptures, the Christian tradition and in Christian experience.[68] In examining divine action in this way Abraham seeks to show how 'divine action is constitutive' of Christian theology.[69] Specifically, Abraham's analysis of divine action is a form of 'theological theology' (God talk).

A central theme running through Abraham's tetralogy on *Divine Agency and Divine Action* is that: 'when we start looking at the specific actions attributed to God then we are in fact doing theology.'[70] Abraham begins, in volume one, by 'clearing the decks' in that he seeks to remove obstacles to the concept of divine action.[71] After surveying writers who deal with divine action Abraham observes how their criteria for what constitutes divine action are too narrow in that they prevent God from accomplishing a host of actions accredited to him in the Bible, the Christian tradition, the liturgy and religious experience.[72] Abraham argues that once we limit divine action in this way 'the whole tradition is in deep trouble.'[73] He puts the matter succinctly: 'If we think God exists' it is 'wise to let God set the agenda for what he does.'[74] Abraham's opposition to this 'standard strategy' once again dovetails with his particularist approach to knowledge. This leads him to posit an 'open concept' of divine action which enables an unencumbered excavation of divine action in Scripture, tradition and experience. Abraham is adamant that if our concept of divine action is too closed and narrow we will be unable to do theology because we will limit 'who God is and what God has done.'[75] He writes:

> It is important to grasp our mode of thinking here. We are not starting out with some vision of the human agent and then adding a network of great-making properties in order to come up with a bigger and better version of human agents. Nor are we projecting a superlative image of ourselves on to the universe. We are seeking as best we can to articulate what we encounter and see once we immerse ourselves in the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and go on to stand within the deep, canonical faith of the church. This happens initially in Christian initiation and then in the work of systematic theology. Beyond that we are in search of an apt conception of the divine that can help us negotiate our intellectual conversion and that will provide appropriate background assumptions in our systematic theology and in our worship and service to the Living God. In traditional terms we are still working in the mode of faith seeking understanding.[76]

Thus, at a foundational level, Abraham considers that analytic theology must begin with an open concept of divine action. It must not presuppose narrow stipulations concerning what God can or cannot do. It must instead begin with 'what God has done. This is simply another description for theology proper.'[77] Thus, presupposing an open concept of divine action Abraham, proceeds in volume two to reflect upon the activity of divine action in its particularity across the centuries.

The array of premodern thinkers (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant) discussed by Abraham is impressive. Focusing upon writers antecedent to the modern period, Abraham discusses Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine of Hippo, Maximus the Confessor, Symeon the New Theologian, Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, John Calvin and Luis de Molina. However, though he covers a lot of ground, the reader can find their bearings in his recapitulation of a

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65 Gavrilyuk, 'In Memoriam,' 11-14.

66 William J. Abraham, 'Divine Action and History' (University of Oxford. Faculty of Theology, 1977).

67 William J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

68 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*.

69 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, I:175.

70 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:1.

71 Of late, a number of writers have reflected on this topic: Mark Murphy, *Divine Holiness and Divine Action* (Oxford: University Press, 2021); Jeffrey Koperski, *Divine action, determinism, and the laws of nature* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

72 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, I:198.

73 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, I:32.

74 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, I:209.

75 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, I:79-81; 146. Here Abraham's fundamental orientation is, it seems, shaped by what he later refers to as 'the tradition of Saint Basil' Mitchell. For further discussion see: Abraham, 'Turning Philosophical Water into Theological Wine,' 1-16; Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 7-8.

76 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, IV:21.

77 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, I:110.

central theme: the relationship between divine and human agency. Abraham's objective, in surveying the rich contours of the Christian tradition prior to the Enlightenment, is to understand the nature of divine action more fully in order to enhance our vision of the nature of God; to open 'up vistas on divine action in the history of Christian theology that can operate as paradigms of salutary reflection.'[78] Here it is helpful to focus upon a couple of examples.

In his discussion of Symeon the New Theologian, Abraham examines the question of apostolic succession. Here he is interested particularly in the relationship between human agents (such as bishops) serving an institutional church and the action of the Holy Spirit in and through them.[79] However, following Symeon, he indicates his support for the suggestion that people can be initiated into the church (into the life of God) by someone other than a bishop (such as a lay monk):

> We might express the import of this interpretation by insisting that the work of the Holy Spirit is free to mediate the full treasures of salvation outside episcopal succession. Put in other terms … it is not that the Holy Spirit operates only fully and even exclusively through the channels of the 'institutional church.'[80]

Put simply, if we centre divine agency exclusively within the institutional church, our understanding of God might lead us to believe that those who remain outside that church are eternally damned. Though he does not mention Wesley at this juncture, it is clear that Abraham is shaped by his Methodist roots in taking up this position.[81] A similar omission may be illustrated in his discussion of Calvin's work. Here he highlights that: 'What emerges as we explore what God has done in predestination and related actions is the metaphysical question of how we are to think of God in the first place.'[82] Put simply, if we emphasize divine agency, without having a 'robust concept of human agency' our idea of God will be susceptible to the notion that the deity predestines some people to heaven and some people to hell; that 'human agents are not able to do otherwise than God predetermines.'[83] However, using his survey of Christian thinkers, Abraham offers numerous counterexamples which support his belief that God does not simply predetermine human actions but instead (through prevenient grace perhaps?) provides them with the opportunity to respond to salvation.[84] Given this fact, it is curious that Abraham, a Methodist, does not offer a detailed analysis of John Wesley's work and mentions him only in a footnote.[85] Nevertheless, while this criticism is warranted, Abraham is right to highlight the way in which those such as Calvin, seeking to 'exalt the glory of God' by emphasizing divine agency, can all too easily be interpreted as depicting a capricious deity who damns human beings before they are even born.[86] Thus, his critical engagement with the Christian tradition is entirely theological in that it is intended to enhance our vision of the nature of divine action across the centuries.

Having explored the rich treasures of the Christian tradition up until the modern period, Abraham proceeds in volume three to offer a clear account of Christian teaching (theology proper) that can equip church leaders and build up the faithful:

> Systematic theology is related to the formation of clergy just as medicine is tied to the formation of doctors. If we do not have robust formation in systematic theology, we will ensure widespread malpractice in the church …. I mean here a systematic theology that avoids being distracted by the host of ancillary questions, say, in exegesis, history, epistemology … and the like. I desire to speak directly and frankly about God.[87]

Here systematic theology is not focused upon biblical exegesis, neither is it engaged primarily with epistemological questions, it is envisaged rather as post-baptismal (for members of the church), university-level catechesis and is drawn from the whole range of canonical materials.[88]

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78 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:1

79 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, II:136-137.

80 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, II:136.

81 Taking things to another level, Wesley 'ordained' Thomas Coke to go as 'superintendent' to America. For further discussion see: William J. Abraham, *John Wesley for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 22.

82 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, II:194.

83 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, II:195.

84 His thought is clearly informed by Wesley in this regard: William Abraham, *Key United Methodist Beliefs* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 73.

85 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, II:187n23.

86 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, II:197.

87 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:7.

88 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:11; Abraham, *Canonical Theism*, 300.

Within the canonical heritage, particularly the creeds, Abraham identifies a 'network of divine actions neatly summarized in terms of creation, freedom, fall, redemption, and consummation.'[89] Therefore, rather than extrapolating theology from (criterion) the Scriptures, Abraham takes a totally different approach:

> Scripture, the biblical canon, it will be said, is the foundation, the criterion for Christian theology. If I am right [then] this claim is clearly false. I am claiming that the church officially adopted its doctrines without first coming up with a Bible and then developing the former from the latter.[90]

This clearly marks a departure from his Protestant roots and situates Abraham's proposals in a terrain which many evangelicals fear to tread. To be absolutely clear, Abraham remained evangelical to the very end. However, he recognised that the canon of scripture was discerned using the creeds and other antecedent materials which precede the Scriptures chronologically in the church's canonical heritage. Though this may sound radical, it is refreshing for anyone aware of the challenges raised by textual criticism. In this regard, Abraham offers an important challenge to writers like Ehrman who reject Christianity because they claim that the Bible was edited by the early church.[91] Abraham contends that, even if this is the case:

> The more plausible explanation is that folk felt secure enough in the faith of the church to fix what they considered to be a wayward text here and there that they had received.[92]

Essentially Abraham argues that, while 'theology lives off scripture,' systematic theology 'goes beyond its treasures' in that it offers a 'full bodied articulation of the central themes' of the Christian faith.[93] In sum, it is not the case that the Bible alone is the religion of canonical theism, its theology is systematically rooted in the whole canonical heritage.

In volume four, his final publication, Abraham tentatively engages with issues that touch upon contextual theology when exploring some of the metaphysical questions that arise in theology.[94] For example, he examines the relationship between divine action and the liberation of the oppressed. This is particularly interesting given the fact that analytic theologians are often criticized for failing to attend to these topics. According to Rea:

> Over the past several decades, scholars working in biblical, theological, and religious studies have increasingly attended to the substantive ways in which our experiences and understanding of God, and of God's relation to the world, are (partially) structured by our experiences and concepts of race, gender, disability, and sexuality. These personal and social identities and their intersections (for better or worse) serve as hermeneutical lenses for our interpretations of God, self, others, and our religious texts and traditions. However, these topics have not received the same level of attention from analytic theologians as other more traditional topics, and so a wide range of important issues remains ripe for analytic treatment.[95]

This criticism is warranted in that much analytic theology, undertaken by wealthy white individuals, has been untouched (empirically) by many of these issues.[96] However, while Abraham only examined these issues at the close of his life, his story (as we have seen) was not untouched by difficulties. He knew about poverty (empirically) and his reflections upon liberation theology offer important insights. Nevertheless, his sharp dismissal of the epistemological orientation of liberation theology is unwarranted and needs to be challenged.

While exploring the concept of 'Divine Action' in relation to the 'Preferential Option for the Poor' Abraham questions why liberation theologians assume that the poor are in a privileged (epistemological) position when it comes to accessing both the (1) truth about their oppression and the (2) truth about God. He writes:

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89 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:23.

90 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:14; Abraham, *Canonical Theism*, 290.

91 A classic example is: Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know About Them)* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2009).

92 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:14n11.

93 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, III:iii, 2.

94 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, IV:2.

95 Michael Rea, ed. *Voices from the Edge: Centring Marginalized Perspectives in Analytic Theology* (Oxford: University Press, 2020), 1.

96 Sarah Coakley's work might perhaps be considered as an exception: Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge: University Press, 2013).

> The claim that the poor have privileged access to the truth about the root causes of poverty is weak … What about the claim that the poor as a community provide us with privileged access to the truth about the content of scripture? … We now have to leave scripture and go ask the poor for guidance … Aside from the fact that the study of scripture will involve significant expertise in the field of biblical studies, we will have to rely on reports supplied by liberation theologians to find out what the poor are telling us about divine action in liberation ... The idea of serious, independent evidence has evaporated.[97]

There are serious problems with Abraham's position at this juncture. First of all, as has been highlighted above, Abraham repeatedly advocates that we begin an enquiry with particular knowledge claims and then formulate criteria to evaluate that knowledge. At its heart, this particularist epistemological orientation acknowledges that everyone, whoever they are, has some knowledge and can legitimately begin an enquiry with these knowledge claims in hand. His adoption of this position, in a wide range of publications, makes his pseudo-evidentialist critique of the epistemological vantage point of the oppressed (above) curious. While it might be an exaggeration to suggest that they acquire a privileged epistemological position, they surely do have some empirical knowledge about who is tangibly causing their oppression – scars and wounds that an outsider simply does not possess.

First of all, there is no reason why a liberation theologian could not adopt a particularist orientation which acknowledges the acute knowledge of oppression possessed by the poor. This knowledge could legitimately be presupposed at the start of a work on liberation theology without requiring that the oppressed become professors in Western philosophical departments. As a safeguard, this knowledge could be situated within the network of epistemic platitudes outlined by Abraham himself in his very fine work *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (2006); platitudes designed to prevent outrageous claims to knowledge from gaining a foothold in a community.[98] Secondly, as illustrated in his work on systematic theology, this particularist approach works equally well in a theological setting (whether liberative, systematic or otherwise). Put simply, believers who are oppressed already have some antecedent knowledge of the canonical heritage (such as Scriptures and creeds) and can indeed bring that knowledge into dialogue with their knowledge of the oppression they experience. These knowledge claims can be situated within the context of what might be termed *theological epistemic platitudes* (perhaps even including the ballooning platitude of historical critical exegesis) in order to prevent obtuse theological positions or interpretations. In sum, liberation theologians can readily make use of the particularist orientation utilised by Abraham himself and, in the process, respond to his epistemological criticisms of their work.[99]

While the above may appear to suggest that Abraham fails to meet the challenge set down by figures like Rea, his analysis of the relationship between divine and human action is incisive. He poses the following question: 'What does it mean to say that God liberates the oppressed?' He writes:

> The claim that God is liberating such groups is clear. We have a specific action verb, 'liberate,' and a specified agent, 'God'; so, all looks well and good. However, this is but the beginning; we now need to provide more detailed specification. This is so because liberation is a polymorphous activity. Like teaching and farming we need to identify the actions down the line that constitute liberation … we now need to know what are the specific acts of God that constitute the master act of divine liberation. Yet liberation theology makes a sudden turn in a radically different direction at this point.[100]

Here Abraham offers an important observation in that, rather than expound the nature of divine action in liberation, theologians operating within this area of contextual theology prefer to examine the systematic causes of poverty and oppression. Thus, the important theological work, of analysing the way in which God is active in this liberation, is entirely absent.[101]

One possible reason for the lack of focus on divine agency in this important theological tradition, and the great emphasis that it places upon human agency, is perhaps (accidently) due to its connection to philosophical variations of Marx and Gramsci, whose atheism was no secret. However, at this juncture Abraham is right to observe that

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97 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, IV:117-118.

98 For a list of these platitudes see: Abraham, *Crossing*, 35-38.

99 For an epistemological particularist approach to liberation theology see: Daniel Pratt Morris-Chapman, *An Ambazonian Liberation Theology: A Theological-Political Response to the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroun* (Stellenbosch: Sunlife Media, 2022).

100 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, IV:113.

101 Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, IV:120.

liberation theologians needn't subscribe wholesale to atheism, Marxism, or Gramsci in order to analyse the 'causal mechanisms that underwrite the oppression' under discussion. Abraham thus states that 'Marx' is indeed useful, and is indeed 'correct in identifying capitalism as the root cause of poverty.' However, while he acknowledges this point he believes this theological tradition should engage in more serious reflection on the role played by God in liberation:

> God and divine action have suddenly disappeared from the scene of the action. Once we go in search of the causal mechanisms that bring about poverty, we are already introducing human agency into our vision of liberation.[102]

In sum, while these writers emphasise that God is a liberating God, once they identify what is needed for liberation it is human action which takes centre stage. Abraham tries to resolve this problem by proposing a distinction between 'primary and secondary' actions of God or even a kind of 'double-agency' in which liberation is 'both an act of God and an act of human agents.' However, whatever the solution, Abraham is right to identify this difficulty, and it seems this difficulty is rooted in the (accidental) presupposition of an atheistic philosophical outlook which, if modified, could readily be utilized in the service of this important theological tradition.[103]

Conclusion

When a thinker impacts so many lives, in so many different ways, we owe it to them to try to discern the contours of their work for future research. I anticipate that Abraham's contribution will be important for many years to come. Nevertheless, the attempt to summarise the work of a man whose publications span more than four decades is clearly folly on my part. His influence—ecumenical, philosophical and theological—extends far beyond the green fields of Ireland and it is far wider than the Methodist tradition he called his home. Fortunately, for my sake, his legacy is not dependent upon human hands (Eph 3:20).[104]

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[102] Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, IV:114.

[103] Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, IV:116.

[104] On a personal note, although I never met him, his written words have changed my life.

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