

Steven Nemes. *Theological Authority in the Church: Reconsidering Traditionalism and Hierarchy*. Cascade Books, 2023. xviii + 147 pp. \$38.00 (hbk); \$23.00 (pbk).

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I direct the Great Books program at a predominantly Protestant university, and a number of the students I teach undergo what they call a “Catholic crisis” during the fall of their sophomore year. This is when they read the medieval classics, including Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Dante Alighieri, Hildegard of Bingen, and Bernard of Clairvaux, and the forms of Christianity they encounter there look more like Roman Catholicism than the non-denominational churches that most of them were raised in. So they question whether Catholicism is a truer form of the faith, some of them eventually decide that it is, joining a recent movement of converts to Catholicism and theologians who, while remaining Protestant, are especially enamored of Aquinas (see McKnight 2002; De Chirico 2024). Steven Nemes, who earned a Ph.D. in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary, also came quite close to swimming the Tiber. In fact, he wrote an article in 2017 that argued for the ultimate priority of the “Tradition of the Church” in interpreting the Bible (Nemes 2017).¹ However, he has since decisively turned away from the Catholic church, and part of the motivation for this book is to explain some of his core reasons (xii).

Nemes correctly identifies the key difference between Protestantism and its Catholic and Orthodox siblings as not being about justification, transubstantiation, or the Marian dogmas, but as rooted in the question of theological authority: are there individuals or groups in the church who have “the standing to tell other persons (not) to do or believe something for the sake of friendship with God” (xiii)? Nemes’s contention is that only God has such authority, and he makes the case for this claim in this book primarily by appealing to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. The analysis of the New Testament is thus central here, while related philosophical and historical issues are discussed in two of his other books (Nemes 2022 and 2023).

Chapter 1 lays out the thesis in some detail and makes careful distinctions. Nemes acknowledges that some humans can and should exercise proper authority in the church, but their authority is always fallible and reversible, and importantly only derived from the infallible and irreversible teachings of God, especially through Christ. It is only when a human being is being faithful to those teachings, and not striking out on their own, that their conditional authority is legitimate. Nemes points to the desire to have a central human authority that could infallibly resolve theological disagreements as a central motivation of contemporary converts to Catholicism, something I have witnessed myself in my students. While Eastern Orthodoxy is occasionally mentioned, the book is focused on arguing against the Catholic view of authority, often citing that church’s conciliar documents and scholars aligned with Rome.

¹ Curiously, Nemes never refers to or cites this paper in this book, despite its common subject matter.

While Orthodoxy's rejection of the papacy makes its claim to infallible authority less centralized, many of this book's arguments also apply to the conception of authority found in that tradition.

Nemes defines in Chapter 2 two key ideas, "Traditionalism" and "Hierarchy," which he uses to characterize the beliefs of Pharisees of Jesus' day. Traditionalism in his usage involves treating pronouncements made at one time by a religious community as irreversible and binding on future generations, with rejection of such decisions being grounds for excommunication. His concept of Hierarchy describes a structural feature of a community where a sub-group or individual can require things of others merely by virtue of their role and without needing any further justification or argument. They cannot be corrected or disobeyed. Nemes appeals to historical scholarship about the *pharisaioi* to illustrate how these two ideas characterized how they operated. He then goes further by citing passages from the documents of Vatican II to argue that the Catholic Church is structurally similar to the Pharisees' Traditionalism and Hierarchy by the way that the bishops and the pope are treated. Nemes argues that a "dual agency" is being proposed, where the bishops are speaking and God is also speaking through them, and hence the teachings of the bishops carry the very same authority as God, with no further court of appeal (8–9).

The next two chapters appeal to the teachings of Jesus to make the case that Traditionalism and Hierarchy are contrary to his intentions for the church. Chapter 3 focuses on Matthew 15:1–9, where Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees for not following the tradition of washing hands before eating. Nemes points out that Jesus "utterly disregards" this tradition as merely "human precepts," while criticizing the Pharisees' disregard for publicly revealed divine commandments. The weight of human tradition is treated by Christ as inconsequential compared to the authority of scripture, and he does not mention any conditions that the Pharisees failed to meet to be a proper source of tradition or apply their authority incorrectly. So Nemes argues that Jesus is simply not operating in a Traditionalist framework; instead, because Jesus uses the commandment of God as the measure for assessing human traditions, they must always be "separable and distinct in principle" (16).

Nemes treats this episode as an interpretive key for understanding many of the other New Testament passages he will discuss. However, the conclusions he draws from this passage are not quite as strongly supported as he believes. Yes, Christ's attitude towards these traditions is dismissive without any qualifications, and so any blind following of human traditions is ruled out. But thoughtful Catholics and Orthodox believers do not subscribe to such blanket acceptance of tradition. While they put more epistemic weight on tradition than Protestants, most traditional beliefs are in principle able to be challenged, and only a relatively small set of doctrines are claimed to have been given with infallible authority.

In fact, this is the implicit paradigm Jesus is operating with. While he rejected the Pharisees' non-biblical traditions, most of the commandments of God he was appealing to came through Moses and the Prophets, where divine and human words did coincide. The question of the prophetic origins of scripture itself is one that Nemes does not address but is deeply relevant. There are many warnings against false prophets throughout scripture, and so putative prophets must be carefully tested and their words not accepted merely because they claim authority. But for the genuine prophet, their words are in fact also God's, and there does seem to be real dual agency here. The traditions that begin with their words are ones that must be obeyed, and Jesus chastises the Pharisees for not doing so.

This continues in the New Testament era with the office of apostle. They transmit what Jesus taught during his earthly ministry, but they do more than that. Jesus promises them at the Last Supper, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When

the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:12–13). He has more to teach them (and through them the church). For example, Paul’s instructions on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12–14 are considered authoritative, but we have no record of Jesus teaching about them, since such gifts had not yet been given to his followers. The apostles operate as conduits for further divine teachings that Jesus said the Spirit would give them. This does not make the apostles always infallible (they make mistakes and repent in Acts), but they are occasionally. So Jesus teaches that human words can sometimes be binding divine words, and thus he is a Traditionalist. The real questions here are how to discern which traditions are genuinely from God and whether the Catholic Church’s claim to be promulgating genuine traditions is true.

Nemes’ arguments are stronger in Chapter 4, where Hierarchy is critiqued. He begins his case with Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 23:8–10, “You are not to be called ‘rabbi,’ for you all have one teacher while you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your ‘father,’ for you all have one Father in the heavens. Neither are you to be called instructors, for the Messiah alone is your instructor.” Nemes rightly argues that Jesus is not implausibly saying we should never use the title of “teacher” or call our male parents “father.” Instead, as evident in the passage’s context, he is reacting against the Pharisees elevating certain human beings (namely themselves) over others in teaching authority. In Christ’s church, only God has that kind of authority. “All his disciples are equal in rank in comparison with each other; no one of them is above the others” (30). While Nemes does not cite Acts 2, he could have appealed to Peter’s Pentecost claim that Joel’s prophecy was being fulfilled, that the Spirit was being poured out “on all flesh,” and the prophetic gift of hearing directly from God was now not only for a small subset of his people, but for all, men and women, young and old, and even slaves. This vision of the democratization of unmediated access to God runs directly contrary to Hierarchy.

The rest of the chapter consists of over 30 pages addressing a Catholic argument for Hierarchy based on Matthew 16, where Jesus addresses Peter and talks about a rock on which he would build his church, giving keys to the kingdom and authority to bind and loose. There are many complex issues here, and entire books have been written on this pericope alone. Nemes does a good job laying out the various options, conducting grammatical analysis on the Greek text, summarizing contemporary Protestant and Catholic biblical scholars, as well as looking at interpretations throughout church history. He builds on past discussions of this famous passage with up-to-date scholarship, such as arguments regarding the Aramaic words that Jesus could have used that may underlie the Greek text we have.

The fairly even-handed assessment of Catholic and Protestant scholarship here stands in contrast to his earlier treatments of Matthew 15:1–9 (the hand-washing tradition) and 23:8–10 (one teacher, all brothers). No Catholic interpretations of those earlier passages that defend Traditionalism and Hierarchy are considered. This is a particularly important weakness because in many of Nemes’s subsequent arguments regarding other passages that initially appear to support Hierarchy, he has Matthew 15 and 23 serve as core reasons that problematize those *prima facie* readings and call for other interpretations to resolve the seeming conflict. While arguments are often given for the intrinsic strength of these alternative options, strengthening Nemes’s favored readings of the core Matthew 15 and 23 texts by countering Catholic readings of them would have made those alternative options to the other seemingly pro-Hierarchy passages much more necessary to adopt. It would have been good to engage with Catholic and Orthodox interpretations of those core passages, since these texts bear so much weight in the overall argument.

Chapter 5 treats three different instances where the apostles seemed to be exercising or addressing their authority in the church. The gathering in Acts 15 is sometimes called the Jerusalem Council, when it was decided that Gentiles did not need to become Jews to be saved. Yet Nemes points out that when we look closer, we do not see Peter or James appealing to their own authority to pronounce a judgment, but rather looking to scripture and what God had been doing among them, especially in giving the Spirit to the Gentile Cornelius and his family and friends. Nemes also argues that the partisanship among the Corinthians and Paul's response to it are both evidence that the apostolic church did not exhibit Hierarchy: "the Corinthians would not have divided themselves along the lines of their preferred teachers if there had been any official or well-known hierarchical division among the apostles and early itinerant teachers. There certainly would be no basis for saying 'I am of Paul' if everyone knew and acknowledged that Simon Peter was the head of the apostles" (76). And Paul's response is not to set the record straight as to which apostle was at the top, but to tell them not to boast in any human being, Apollos and Paul only being servants who plant and water. Nemes' treatment of 1 John is relatively brief, acknowledging that John does appeal to his apostolic authority when he says, "We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us" (4:6). But he argues that this is a derivative authority, only relaying and bearing witness to what John had seen and heard from Christ.

The sixth chapter is the last substantive one and covers a variety of possible objections to the thesis of the book, including the canon, infallibility/inerrancy, and clarity of scripture, fallibility, essentials of the faith, ecclesiology, church unity, heresy, and anxiety over one's salvation. I will close by discussing what seems to most animate Nemes here: a call to focus on the actual teachings of Jesus and to refuse to make essential the metaphysical claims regarding the natures of God, Christ, and the Eucharist that have divided the church throughout history, leading to excommunications, persecutions, and executions:

Jesus did not authorize anyone in his church to impose their convictions on others with threats ... retreating from metaphysical speculation to the world of experience naturally means putting a greater emphasis on matters of action, so that Christian faith becomes a principally ethical, spiritual, and practical affair, rather than the contemplation and even dogmatic enforcement of metaphysical speculations. (120–1)

We could have unity while charitably disagreeing on matters that have not been directly revealed by God.

I am sympathetic to Nemes here and believe it is wrong to pronounce an anathema merely because someone falls on the wrong side of, say, the monothelite-dyothelite controversy. He is right to criticize the too common tendency to ignore Jesus' clear commands about how to treat each other and to fixate on disputes over questions of little or no practical import. But I question if all or even most of the divisions within Christianity are actually rooted in metaphysical speculation. Certainly some are, but there are also many that have to do with praxis: sharp disagreements over liturgy and musical styles (or even whether the use of any instruments at all is permissible), or polity and governance, or what kinds of spirituality, prayer, and asceticism should be practiced. And this is not to mention the heated debates over ethics. None of these questions that directly bear on what we should or should not do can be avoided, and so it is unlikely that Christians could easily be united even if all metaphysical topics were ignored.

Indeed, certain controversial metaphysical questions and views come directly out of trying to understand and obey Jesus' direct teachings, such as John 6:53, "Truly, truly, I say to you,

unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” To have life, we have to understand what he means when he says to eat his flesh and drink his blood. In John 8:24, Jesus emphasizes that his listeners must have a certain view of him to be saved: “I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.” The Greek simply says, *ego eimi*, “I am,” without any “he,” which is what we find in the Septuagint version of God’s self-revelation in Exodus 3. Jesus seems to be teaching that having a particular view of his relationship with the God of Sinai is critical for our salvation.

Nevertheless, despite these criticisms, I still agree with the overall spirit of Nemes’s argument, in this last chapter and in the book overall. He has identified the key issue in the Protestant-Catholic/Orthodox divide and has given that question a systematic treatment, with argumentation that, while not perfect, is still quite persuasive at the macro level. It is the best such treatment that I have seen so far, and I will be referring my students who are undergoing a Catholic crisis to this book, confident that they will thus gain a clearer understanding of what they should be considering as they make such an important decision.

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