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Realist Retrieval

MATT MARINO, PhD



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Retrieval theology has all but become a subset of historical theology. To “retrieve,” in this sense, is to return to the sources (*ad fontes*) in order to recall the great voices of the past and bring them to bear on the present. But what exactly does it mean to bring them to bear on the present? I suggest that it means more than that we borrow a little of their wisdom to settle a controversy. I especially discourage wasting the time of the venerable dead to settle a controversy that costs us nothing.

The truth is that the “chattering class,” as someone once called intellectuals, is ever staffed with nothing but sycophants and second-handers. They are often the sort of people that treat the life of the mind as a gentleman’s game, so gentle that if any of those venerable dead were here today, they would be locked up for violating some unspoken rules against toxic masculinity. With charity in one hand, we ought to hold enough discernment in the other to realize that many of the guides into retrieval will be curators of the status quo. I will return to this thought.

There are several reasons that we engage in theological retrieval. I will mention five that are fairly uncontroversial.

First, to discover what Christian theologians of the past actually said in their own context and on their own terms. The increased interest in Thomas Aquinas among the Reformed in the past decade would be a case in point.

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Second, to bring balance and correction to those errors characteristic of our own times and traditions. That great statement by C. S. Lewis about “the old books” comes to mind here.¹

Third, to ground exegetical, dogmatic, or ethical arguments in recognized authority. This is not only the case about creeds and confessions, but we might also think of how the magisterial Reformers rooted so much of their reasoning in the early church fathers.

Fourth, to demonstrate the existence, predominance, or cogency of “idea-traditions” presently marginalized. Protestant resistance theory and conceptions of the civil magistrate are presently being unearthed against the nearer backdrop of twentieth century Protestantism which was impoverished, and, in fact, utterly oblivious of such thinking.

Fifth, to demonstrate diversity within said traditions presently conceived as monolithic. The views of the early church fathers on subjects ranging from free will to the sacraments to the future of Israel, are standard fare here. Anachronistic readings abound, as moderns quote-mine to prevail in controversies that were not on the minds of those ancient authors. Beyond that, they disagree with each other on many such points.

I say that these are uncontroversial. By that, I am pointing to an agreement among those engaged in this activity to begin with. Naturally, there is also resistance to tradition as such. Fideism has always been among us, to warn of the dangers of consulting the pagan philosophers. Chronological snobbery in the modern world has only added to anxieties about reaching out for help from human authorities less than the inspired authors of Scripture. With those caveats, I think that those who are in the arena of retrieval would all agree to the above goals.

NOMINALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

With such aims in view, a growing number of seminary graduates who have been immersed in the fruit of this scholarship have also received a distorted set of values. What has been described as historical theology’s *descriptive* task, as opposed to the *prescriptive* bent of systematic theology, creates an imbalance. This is a perfectly fine distinction as far as it goes. A previous generation of historians of ideas had learned to exalt above all

¹ C. S. Lewis, Introduction to Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 4, 5.

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other values what Quentin Skinner called “seeing things their way.”² Words, concepts, and positions in texts from before our time must be painstakingly bolted down to the contextual floor by every shred of evidence from their moment. Apart from this, we are imposing on their meaning some universal term or form.

Now I want to state as plainly as possible that anachronistic readings are bad and that they are prevalent. It is a danger lurking in each reader. By contrast, the attempt to understand as precisely as possible what Calvin, Owen, or Mastricht really meant when they spoke negatively of the “scholastics” over here, yet allowed and even utilized many scholastic forms and notions over there—gaining such clarity is the glory of historical theology. However, we become pedantic materialists to the degree that we resist abstraction. One irony is that if they did mean *such a thing*—whatever thing they meant—then it is precisely a thing to which the words signify, a thing which presumably we can also mean today. This is no small point.

There are common predicates by which the same words, analogous words, or even utterly different words cash out to the same thing. The idea that Aristotle and Locke cannot be studied as to their thoughts on individual liberty because the former meant something very different than the latter is immaterial to whether the former sheds any light on the subject at all.

Do not misunderstand. I am not saying that such historians are saying exactly what an extreme nominalism would say. I do not take them to mean that the texts of different times and places contain *nothing but* words that mean *nothing but* what the writer meant to use the word for, there and then. What I am saying is that the tendency is at least to “nominalize” whatever would otherwise have been common between ancient textual meaning and modern textual meaning, between religious textual meaning and political textual meaning.

There is an institutional problem here as well. The vast majority of prestigious doctoral programs in the West, if they have anything to offer theologians at all, drive students to the study of historical theology alone. Why? It is very simple. “What on earth is systematic theology?” That is what a secularist might say—assuming that news of this study has come to his ears at all. And the simple fact of the matter is that even our conservative seminaries wish to have all the luster of a PhD from Oxford, Cambridge, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Utrecht, Munich, or perhaps Harvard or Yale. They must impress all the right people.

² cf. Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory, *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

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If our new scholar should explore biblical studies, very well, that fits under the languages, but if he wants to study “ideas” as such, it can only fit under history. What this comes to mean is that our theologians will be pressed away from prescription to description, which does not mean a mere shift from the imperative to indicative. Rather, it means that one does not take sides or draw conclusions. He reads dogma—or, I should say, he reads about those who dogmatized—but he himself must not *be* dogmatic. It is simply not scholarly to declare the essence of things.



THE TIMELESS FORM OF ORTHODOXY

One of the ways that such academics will deconstruct any attempt at a prescriptive look back to historical theology is to question labels. The exact time markers of idea-eras, exact boundaries around schools of thought, or whether we are being infinitely fair to this or that thinker—since this is all under revision, a favorite “Ackshually” of these secondhand dealers in ideas is to point out that we cannot speak this or that modifying adjective. Soon enough we can say very little.

One example pertinent to a realist outlook on theology retrieval is the expression The Great Tradition. The pop-level progressive may say, “Who gets to decide what is great?” The academics I have in mind will not quite bring themselves that low. However, as with the other deconstructions, they will point out that such a continuity “has been questioned.”

No doubt. But then again, so have biological sex and truth itself. Why should we care about the questions of those who would question such a thing?

The answer is that it is all very subtle, and that is why we should listen to experts like them.

Thus, Plato’s realism and Aristotle’s were very different. They did not even use crucial words like “form” in the same way, and one was the direct pupil of the other. Think of how many centuries intervened before Augustine and Thomas Aquinas appropriated their visions in a Christian context. The sense in which the Greek mind determined early Christian theology as opposed to its debt to the Hebrew Scriptures, or the sense in which Eastern Christianities have just as much right to represent the early faith as those in the Latin West—all of these and more become reasons to begin poking at the idea of some singular, timeless set of truths.

This is usually not stated so baldly as to show their cards. Indeed sometimes the academics are simply parroting each other, and so we cannot say that they all consciously hold the same cards. Many of them genuinely think that this makes

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them sound smart, and they become genuinely convinced that this is the more careful and serious way to view things. The upshot is all the same. If historical texts cannot be read to the specific profit of more profound expressions about more grand realities, then it is not entirely clear how they help us get any closer to the truth.

The lover of great classical texts is too familiar with their treasure to be turned away by this. We know better. More than that, we begin to get the sense the greatest thinkers of them all were not so far apart from each other as today's warring parties would have us think by bearing their names. But we can only find that out by seeing how different angles might amount to the same thing. And that is precisely what realism is all about. Realism is not simply the theory of universals by which common terms point to a more abstract essence. It is about a common thing—being—in which diverse expressions participate.

REALIST RETRIEVAL AND TRADITION

There are two kinds of retrievalists. For one, tradition eventually rises as the universal over truth. For the other, truth emerges as the great unifying set of themes—the common property—of the growing Great Conversation.

It is not that the former is a nominalist or naturalist at heart, but his anxieties in our shifting age reach out to a cheaper solid thing, rooted in space and time, or even a balcony or incense. The latter is the purer realist retrieval. As he is drawn more to the way reality is by means of so many profound expressions in the past, he is increasingly unimpressed by mere traditionalism.

He understands the greatest contributions of the theologians and philosophers as pieces to a mosaic that is far greater than either themselves or their broader traditions. In fact, the mosaic is metaphysical. It is not pageantry. It is not the fiat of mortals. It does not arise from any of Babylon's points on the map below but from the essence of Jerusalem above. Of course the retrievalist who sees this must pick his lane. He stands already in his tradition as well. But he finally gets his footing where he does, not as an end in itself, but as the best vantage point to see more and set more in the abiding mosaic.

Two predictable objections to this should be answered. One comes from an immature realism and the other from a mere traditionalism.

Objection 1. This “realism” looks more like Platonism, purely and simply. But truth is embodied. Universal truths apart from space and time are untrue of space and time, and unattainable within it. Every form must have its matter—at least, if we are talking about the essence of things less than God and purely spiritual entities. We exist in the composite

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realm, and this principle of Aristotle can be applied to the perception and perseverance of truth no better than in the words attributed to Cyprian and Augustine, that one cannot know God as Father apart from knowing the Church as mother. That is the sense in which the right tradition must be the embodiment of truth. It brings unity in the real world.

Reply to Objection 1. A thing can be a source of truth in two ways—either as ultimate or proximate, or, in other words, reason manifest in its magisterial or ministerial form. Calvin agreed with Cyprian and Augustine, yet explains that the mode of this mothering is by nourishment with that truth. The particular reflects the universal; it neither creates it nor hordes it.

“We see that God, who might perfect his people in a moment, chooses not to bring them to manhood in any other way than by the education of the Church. We see the mode of doing it expressed; the preaching of celestial doctrine is committed to pastors. We see that all without exception are brought into the same order, that they may with meek and docile spirit allow themselves to be governed by teachers appointed for this purpose.”³

As to whether the truth must be embodied for those with bodies to see that which is invisible, we affirm—but we distinguish; and we do so with a simple question: Embody *what*? This particular matter takes the form of *what* exactly? As Thomas took from Aristotle, that the form of a thing is its act of being, and that which takes form must be caused by a substance already in act. This greater form is more universal than any particular that participates in its being.

Objection 2. A tradition can in fact function as a universal by virtue of its antiquity—its witness does not “just so happen” to have been there for a long time—but, more importantly, by the authority vested in it by Him who is the Truth itself. Since the Roman Catholic Church possesses both, it follows that this tradition is the embodiment of truth in this world.

Reply to Objection 2. Antiquity is an evidence, to be sure, but evidence is secondary to proof, as the contingent is secondary to necessity. Moreover, great falsehoods and wicked abuses may have long and illustrious careers. Their longevity may be owing to geographic isolation or to relative absence in technological means for challenge or to a series of deliberate repressions of the light of truth. More to the point of the Romanist claim to embody such a thing as truth is, the argument insists that the layperson cannot properly understand the objective truth of God that would rule in this or that matter.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.1.4.

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But we must ask: If that truth that we cannot understand is both understood and ruled upon by the pope, can we understand his ruling? *If (a) we cannot*, then its purpose would seem unintelligible to us. *If (b) we can*, then it would seem superfluous. Consequently, an infallible papal ruling, in either case, would seem to have no rational function. It may be replied that the point of the ruling is not that you may understand, but so that you would be silenced! In other words, the ruling is less epistemological and more punitive. Charles Hodge was correct in saying that each of us has “a pope in his bosom.”⁴ However Rome may have succeeded in suppressing troublemakers, it should be recalled that this was not our question.

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Clearly both of these issues require much deeper treatment than an article like this can provide. I mention it only in order to alert my reader that those engaged in theological retrieval are aware of these issues, and the sort of realism I propose is uniquely equipped to dissolve such alleged difficulties.

On a more common sense level, esoteric accounts of truth arouse our suspicions. We do not deny that one group may be entrusted with truth in a way that others are not. Where we must draw the line to save reason is when such is no longer a case for faithful stewardship and functions as a silencer to further inquiry and discussion. That “tradition” is not worthy of the name. After all, I think we would all agree that not all traditions are equal. We can see this in the same way that we can see that not all cultures are equal. But if we can say this truthfully about both of these inequalities, then what follows about the relationship between truth and tradition? It is simply that truth is a universal to which the more truthful tradition conforms more nearly than the less truthful tradition. Likewise with those which are more or less just to the essence of justice, more or less kind to the essence of kindness, more or less peaceful to the essence of peace, and so forth.

REALIST RETRIEVAL IN THE THEATER OF WAR

There are many advantages to viewing theological retrieval from a realist perspective. I will mention only one other. This may hold no interest for the entrenched academic; but those who are curious about the retrieval of the classical and Reformed political tradition may find it exceedingly interesting. In a war there are not only distinct theaters and points of attack, but also differing tasks fit to positions on the field. In modern warfare there is an air war and ground war. In premodern warfare there was siegecraft. Taking a city often required toilsome siegeworks. Without getting further into the analogy, this will explain part of why the payoff to retrieval work seems so slow or even empty.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III.265.

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Over the past few weeks, I have been posting the quotations I am stockpiling from the *Decades* of Heinrich Bullinger. These are from his section on God's law, stretching from the second to third decades of his sermons. It was brought to my attention that Bullinger's standards for the just use of force do not permit overthrow of a tyrant. That is true "on paper," or in isolation. I share the lament of my fellow reader of old books.

However, one must pay attention to two important facts.



The *first* is that Bullinger's doctrines of the magistrate and of resistance, much like Calvin's, were underdeveloped. It would be left to their theological offspring, like Theodore Beza, John Knox, John Ponet, Francois Hotman, Junius Brutus, Christopher Goodman, Lambert Daneau, George Buchanan, Johannes Althusius, and Samuel Rutherford to hammer out the further implications.⁵

The *second* point I would make is that many things Bullinger did say can easily be arranged as premises which demand the logic of organized resistance to tyranny, even if he himself did not see fit to draw the deduction in plain ink.

I say these things not so much in defense of Bullinger as in defense of the siegeworks. Many retrievalists are working together, over the long haul, each contributing this or that to a total arsenal that the fortress walls will not be able to withstand. A more forceful blow will be struck by a unanimous judgment over a whole tradition, rather than skipping ahead to the best soundbites in this or that thinker.

Sometimes the particular makeup of the fortress walls must be considered. If the impenetrable element in the minds of one or two generations is precisely pietism—and all the more so, under the sophisticated academic garb of the R2K position—then the road to resistance theory runs through the resistance to any talk of Christian use of political power. If it can be shown that the arbiters of "Reformed theology" in the twentieth century are out of their league in evaluating the premodern political inheritance, and if it turns out that they have been keeping this hidden from us all, then these are two quick strikes that must be made first. One must be persuaded that a field is legitimate to occupy before being instructed on how to conquer it.

Military metaphors aside, we do not engage in retrieval to find "our guy" any more than we quote-mine for term papers. I have known people who can only read one or two historical thinkers (and usually someone very modern) because the work of putting

⁵ David W. Hall, *Calvin in the Public Square: Liberal Democracies, Rights, and Civil Liberties* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2009), 129-190.

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together the realist puzzle is too laborious. Archaic language is an offense to their reason. The author is not “getting to the point,” which point turns out to be a well-spoken endorsement of the view one already holds to in its perfected form. Soon enough, even the one or two modern thinkers they could stomach are not quite as brilliant as the way that they would use them.

They are modern Marcionites of the historical canon of the West. They arrived there not out of any low IQ, but because of good old fashioned impatience. They needed the world to conform to their image by yesterday morning, and the older authors had other stories to tell. We should remember that foes of the realist did not only include the nominalist in the Middle Ages, but also the idealist in modernity. Words and texts and lines of reason can be reduced not only to convenient names, but also to the convenience of cheap propaganda.

We have much work to do, but we can only take it in the right direction as realists of the meaning of old texts, and realists of the moral of the story they tell.

© Reformed Classicalist, July 21, 2026. Retrieved August 22, 2026.

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