

# Prolegomena

Systematic philosophical theologies are rare – at least on the contemporary scene.<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich’s *Systematic Theology* and Wolfhart Pannenberg’s *Systematic Theology* deserve to be called systematic philosophical theologies, heavily shaped as they are by philosophical concerns.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, neither of these theologians was able to benefit from the renaissance of Christian philosophy that has transpired in Anglo-American analytic philosophy since the late 1960s. Rather Richard

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<sup>1</sup> By “contemporary” I mean within roughly the last one hundred years, since many of us working today were contemporaries of those who wrote during that time. On this understanding works such as Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* count as contemporary systematic theologies. Historically speaking, the first systematic philosophical theology was Origen’s *Peri archōn* [*On First Principles*], written in the third century. Peter Lombard’s *Sententiarum libri IV* [*Four Books of Sentences*] (ca. 1150) set the model for medieval treatments. The preeminent work in systematic philosophical theology was undoubtedly Thomas Aquinas’ massive *Summa theologiae* (*Summary of Theology*) (1265–74). Outstanding among Protestant thinkers was Francis Turretin’s *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*) (1679–85).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994–1997). Tillich offered an “ontological definition of philosophy” which takes philosophy to be basically metaphysics. Just as philosophy deals with the question of being in terms of categories, structural laws, and universal concepts, so theology, when dealing with our ultimate concern, presupposes in every sentence the structure of being, its categories, laws, and concepts. “On every page of every religious or theological text these concepts appear: time, space, cause, thing, subject, nature, movement, freedom, necessity, life, value, knowledge, experience, being, and not being. . . . Therefore, the systematic theologian must be a philosopher in critical understanding even if not in creative power” (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1. 21). Pannenberg is explicit: “A specific interpretation of the relationship of theology to philosophy fully and unmistakably informs this presentation of Christian doctrine. . . . in my view the first task of a philosophical theology is to fix its intellectual point of departure in the historical revelation of God” (Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:xii).

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Swinburne's tetralogy in philosophical theology, coupled with his trilogy in natural theology, is representative of that tradition and is doubtless the preeminent example of systematic philosophical theology in our day.<sup>3</sup> Many other philosophers or theologians have taken steps toward a systematic philosophical theology, even if the scope of such a project makes the goal elusive.<sup>4</sup>

## 1 The Renaissance of Christian Philosophy

It is precisely the renaissance of Christian philosophy in our day that makes this so opportune a time for the writing of a systematic philosophical theology.

### 1.1 A Look Back

In order to understand our current situation, it is helpful to understand something of where we have been. In a personal retrospective, the eminent Princeton University philosopher Paul Benacerraf describes what it was like doing philosophy at Princeton during the 1950s and 1960s. The overwhelmingly dominant mode of thinking was scientific naturalism. Physical science was taken to be the final, and really only, arbiter of truth. Metaphysics had been vanquished, expelled from philosophy like an unclean leper. "The philosophy of science," says Benacerraf, "was the queen of all the branches" of philosophy, since "it had the tools. . . to address all the problems."<sup>5</sup> Any problem that could not be addressed by science was simply dismissed as a pseudo-problem. If a question did not have a scientific answer, then it was not a real question – just a pseudo-question masquerading as a real question. Indeed, part of the task of philosophy was to clean

<sup>3</sup> Even prior to their completion, Swinburne's seven volumes were being compared to Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* (Philip L. Quinn, "Swinburne on Guilt, Atonement, and Christian Redemption," in *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honor of Richard Swinburne*, ed. Alan G. Padgett [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994], 277). Swinburne's trilogy in natural theology includes *The Coherence of Theism*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), and *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); while his tetralogy comprises *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007); *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Among contemporary systematic philosophical theologies one might mention as well Norman Geisler's *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002–2005).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Stephen T. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Oliver D. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine: Toward a Systematic Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019); Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Benacerraf, "What Mathematical Truth Could Not Be-1," in *The Philosophy of Mathematics Today*, ed. Matthias Schirn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 42.

up the discipline from the mess that earlier generations had made of it by endlessly struggling with such pseudo-questions. There was thus a certain self-conscious, crusading zeal with which philosophers carried out their task. The reformers, says Benacerraf, “trumpeted the militant affirmation of the new faith. . . in which the fumbling confusions of our forerunners were to be replaced by the emerging science of philosophy. This new enlightenment would put the old metaphysical views and attitudes to rest and replace them with the new mode of doing philosophy.”<sup>6</sup>

What Benacerraf is describing is a movement known as Logical Positivism. The book *Language, Truth, and Logic* by the British philosopher A. J. Ayer served as a sort of manifesto for this movement. As Benacerraf says, it was “not a great book,” but it was “a wonderful exponent of the spirit of the time.”<sup>7</sup> The principal weapon employed by Ayer in his campaign against metaphysics was the vaunted Verification Principle of Meaning. According to that Principle, which went through a number of revisions, a sentence in order to be meaningful must be capable in principle of being empirically verified. Since metaphysical statements were beyond the reach of empirical science, they could not be verified and were therefore dismissed as devoid of factual content.

Ayer was explicit about the theological implications of this Verificationism.<sup>8</sup> Since God is a metaphysical object, Ayer says, the possibility of religious knowledge is “ruled out by our treatment of metaphysics.” Thus, there can be no knowledge of God.

Now someone might say that we can offer evidence of God’s existence. But Ayer will have none of it. If by the word “God” you mean a transcendent being, says Ayer, then the word “God” is a metaphysical term, and so “it cannot be even probable that a god exists.” He explains, “To say that ‘God exists’ is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance.”<sup>9</sup>

Suppose a religious believer should appeal to religious experience as a means of knowledge of God. Ayer is not impressed. He would not think to deny that the religious believer has an experience, he says, any more than he would deny that someone has an experience of, say, seeing a yellow object. But, he says, “whereas the sentence ‘There exists here a yellow-colored

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<sup>6</sup> Benacerraf, “What Mathematical Truth Could Not Be,” 42.

<sup>7</sup> Benacerraf, “What Mathematical Truth Could Not Be,” 42.

<sup>8</sup> A. J. Ayer, “Critique of Ethics and Theology,” chap. 6 in *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952).

<sup>9</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 115.

material thing' expresses a genuine proposition which could be empirically verified, the sentence 'There exists a transcendent god' has . . . no literal significance" because it is not verifiable. Thus the appeal to religious experience, says Ayer, is "altogether fallacious."<sup>10</sup>

From this perspective, statements about God do not even have the dignity of being false. Now at first blush such a perspective might seem utterly implausible. If a statement like, "God loves you" were no more meaningful than, "T'was brillig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe," then how could one even know what it was supposed to be about, so as to be able to say that statements about God are metaphysical and therefore meaningless?<sup>11</sup> But as Nicholas Wolterstorff explains in a recent reminiscence:

By the mid-1950s we were all aware of the fact that the term 'meaningless' as employed by the positivists was a term of art. It was not their view that everything that failed their test was jabberwocky – meaningless in that sense – nor was it their view that one should never make utterances that failed their test. They just meant that one had not made an assertion, a true–false claim; one's utterance lacked assertoric meaning.<sup>12</sup>

To illustrate, questions and commands have cognitive meaning, but they are neither true nor false, since they do not make any assertions. Metaphysical and theological sentences might be useful for some purpose but not to make assertions.

It was not just metaphysical statements and, hence, theological statements that were regarded by logical positivists as void of assertoric content. Ethical statements were also declared to be meaningless because they, too, cannot be empirically verified. Such statements are simply emotional expressions of the user's feelings. Ayer says, "if I say 'Stealing money is wrong' I produce a statement which has no factual meaning. . . . It is as if I had written, 'Stealing money!!' . . . It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false."<sup>13</sup> So he concludes that value judgments "have no objective validity whatsoever."<sup>14</sup> The same goes for aesthetic statements

<sup>10</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Taliaferro explains that critics of positivism "argued that meaning was prior to verification; you have first to grasp the meaning of a proposition before grasping what conditions would confirm or disconfirm it. This line of reasoning was designed to pry apart the positivist charge that meaning and verifiability were somehow conceptually united" (Charles Taliaferro, *Evidence and Faith: Philosophy and Religion since the Seventeenth Century*, The Evolution of Modern Philosophy [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 351).

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Then, Now, and Al," *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (2011): 256.

<sup>13</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 107.

<sup>14</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 108.

concerning beauty and ugliness. According to Ayer, “Such aesthetic words as ‘beautiful’ and ‘hideous’ are employed. . . , not to make statements of fact, but simply to express certain feelings. . . .”<sup>15</sup>

It is sobering to realize that this was the sort of thinking that dominated the departments of philosophy at British and American universities during the last century into the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> It was not without its impact on religious life. Under the pressure of positivism, some theologians began to advocate non-cognitivist theories of theological language. In their view theological statements are not statements of fact at all but merely express the user’s emotions and attitudes. For example, the sentence “God created the world” does not purport to make any factual statement at all but merely is a way of expressing, say, one’s awe and wonder at the grandeur of the universe.

Gilbert Ryle poignantly described the state of philosophical-theological dialogue in the late 1950s:

In our half-century philosophy and theology have hardly been on speaking terms. . . . When theological coals were hot, the kettle of theological philosophy boiled briskly. If the kettle of theological philosophy is now not even steaming, it is because that fire has died down. Kettles cannot keep themselves on the boil. A philosopher cannot invent conceptual stresses and strains. He has to feel them if he is to be irked into dealing with them. I do not want to exaggerate. The theological fire has died down, but it has not quite gone out and the kettle of theological philosophy, though far from even simmering, is not quite stone cold.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 113.

<sup>16</sup> I do not mean to suggest that philosophers of religion were absent from the scene during this time. See Eugene Thomas Long, *Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion 1900–2000*, Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion 1 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000). In 1957 Elton Trueblood could speak of “an astonishing amount of vigorous religious thinking,” exemplified by Whitehead, Temple, Maritain, Tillich, Niebuhr, and many more,” and of “the phenomenal new burst of religious interest in American colleges and universities” (David Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957], xi, 3). But I think it would be fair to say that these thinkers lay outside the dominant mainstream of analytic Anglo-American philosophy. Dean Zimmerman reminds us that during the period of positivist rule, “an indomitable little group” of analytic British philosophers and theologians such as F. R. Tennant, Austin Farrer, A. C. Ewing, H. H. Price, Ian Ramsey, H. D. Lewis, Basil Mitchell, and a few others carried on with philosophical theology as usual (Dean Zimmerman, “Three Introductory Questions,” in *Persons: Human and Divine*, ed. Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007], 1–13). What is remarkable about the recent renaissance of Christian philosophy is that it has arisen wholly within the mainstream analytic tradition.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert Ryle, “Final Discussion,” in *The Nature of Metaphysics*, ed. D. F. Pears (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 159–60. I am indebted to Charles Taliaferro for this reference. Note that Ryle does not attribute the tepid state of philosophical-theological dialogue so much to philosophy as to theology, whose flames had died down. Gordon Graham rightly observes that the divorce between theology and philosophy was not only advocated by logical positivists and existentialists from the philosophical side but was insisted upon by the highly influential theology of Karl Barth from the side of theology (Gordon Graham, “Philosophy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance,

The low point undoubtedly came with the so-called Death of God theology of the mid-1960s.<sup>18</sup> On April 8, 1966, *Time* magazine carried a cover which was completely black except for three words emblazoned in bright, red letters against the dark background: “Is God Dead?” And the article described the movement then current among American theologians to proclaim the death of God.

Today that movement has all but disappeared. The kettle of theological philosophy is once more boiling briskly, at least in the Anglo-American realm. What happened?

## 1.2 *The Collapse of Verificationism*

What happened is a remarkable story. Philosophers within the analytic tradition itself exposed an incoherence which lay at the very heart of the prevailing philosophy of positivism. They began to realize that the Verification Principle would force us to dismiss not only theological statements as meaningless, but also a great many scientific statements, so that the Principle undermined the sacred cow of science at whose altar they knelt.

Contemporary physics is filled with metaphysical statements that cannot be empirically verified. When the contemporary student of physics reads the anti-metaphysical polemics of early twentieth century scientists, he must feel as though he were peering into a different world. For it is now widely recognized that the boundaries of science are impossible to fix with precision, and during the last few decades theoretical physics has become characterized precisely by its metaphysical, speculative character. In various fields such as relativity theory, quantum mechanics, classical cosmology, and quantum cosmology, debates rage over overtly metaphysical issues.<sup>19</sup> Take relativity theory, for example. Both special and general relativity are susceptible to radically different interpretations of the same physical phenomena and raise profound metaphysical questions about the nature of space and time. The eminent philosopher of science John Earman contends that when it comes to questions about the nature of space and time, there is simply no way to justify an empirical/philosophical dichotomy; the

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[Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 514). Thus, says Carl Henry, dialectical-existential theology was “powerless to withstand the onslaught of naturalistic secularism and logical positivism, which take the dialectical-existential disavowal of valid cognitive claims for deity as confirmatory evidence that theology is nonsense” (Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 1, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Preliminary Considerations* [Waco, TX: Word, 1976], 188).

<sup>18</sup> See Paul M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

<sup>19</sup> For discussion see my *Time and the Metaphysics of Relativity*, Philosophical Studies Series 84 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 139–148.

appropriate term for the study is the old one: Natural Philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Or consider quantum physics. In Euan Squires' opinion, "In an effort to understand the quantum world, we are led beyond physics, certainly into philosophy and maybe even into cosmology, psychology and theology."<sup>21</sup> There are at least ten different physical interpretations of the mathematical formalism of quantum mechanics which are empirically equivalent and yet differ meaningfully in their respective ontologies. Or take the field of classical cosmology. "Cosmology," says George Gale, "is science done at the limit: at the limit of our concepts, of our mathematical methods, of our instruments, indeed, of our very imaginations."<sup>22</sup> In an article in *Astronomy*, astrophysicists Tony Rothman and George Ellis pose the question, "Has astronomy become metaphysical?" and answer that it has.<sup>23</sup> Questions which are metaphysical in character are hotly debated in astrophysical journals. Gale observes, "It is clear that metaphysics continues to play an honorable role in cosmology. And, to the extent that it is an honorable role, it is no dishonor to use metaphysics in one's cosmologizing."<sup>24</sup> Physics becomes most metaphysical in the budding field of quantum cosmology. Alex Vilenkin frankly characterizes his discipline as "metaphysical cosmology."<sup>25</sup> Metaphysical questions, hypotheses, and difficulties are abundant in these and other fields of modern physics. Philosopher of science Bas van Fraassen nicely puts it: "Do the concepts of the Trinity [and] the soul. . . baffle you? They pale beside the unimaginable otherness of closed space-times, event-horizons, EPR correlations, and bootstrap models."<sup>26</sup> If the ship of scientific naturalism was not to be scuttled, Verificationism had to be cut loose.

But even more fundamentally, it was also realized that the Verification Principle is self-refuting. One has but to ask oneself, is the sentence "A meaningful sentence must be capable in principle of being empirically verified" *itself* capable of being empirically verified? Obviously not; no amount of empirical evidence would serve to verify its truth. The Verification Principle is therefore by its own lights a meaningless combination of words, which need hardly detain us, or at best an arbitrary definition, which we are at liberty to reject. Therefore, the Verification Principle and the theory

<sup>20</sup> John Earman, "Who's Afraid of Absolute Space?," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 3 (1970): 317.

<sup>21</sup> Euan Squires, *The Mystery of the Quantum World* (Bristol: Adam Hilger, 1986), 4.

<sup>22</sup> George Gale, "Cosmos and Conflict," paper presented at the conference "The Origin of the Universe," Colorado State University, Ft. Collins, CO, September 22–25, 1988.

<sup>23</sup> Tony Rothman and George Ellis, "Has Cosmology become Metaphysical?" *Astronomy*, 15 no., 2 (1987), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Gale, "Cosmos and Conflict."

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Vilenkin, "Birth of Inflationary Universes," *Physical Review D* 27 (1983): 2854.

<sup>26</sup> Bas C. van Fraassen, "Empiricism in the Philosophy of Science," in *Images of Science: Essays on Realism and Empiricism*, ed. by Paul M. Churchland and Clifford A. Hooker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 258.

of meaning it supported have been universally abandoned by philosophers. William Hasker observes, “Nowadays ethics, religion, metaphysics, and science all go about their business largely untroubled by the positivist assault, which is well on its way to becoming a distant memory.”<sup>27</sup>

### 1.3 *The Advent of Postmodernism*

The downfall of positivism and the reopening for discussion of virtually all the traditional problems in philosophy has been called the central philosophical event of the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> One result of this collapse has been the rise of Postmodernism. Scientific naturalism, originating in the Enlightenment, is characteristic of so-called “Modernity,” or the modern age, which is dominated by science and technology. The collapse of Verificationism brought with it a sort of disillusionment with the whole Enlightenment project of scientific naturalism.

This might seem at first blush a welcome development for Christian believers, weary of attacks by Enlightenment naturalists. But Postmodernists have unfortunately tended to despair of ever finding objective truth and knowledge. After all, if science, man’s greatest intellectual achievement, cannot do so, then what hope is there? Hence, Postmodernists have tended to deny that there are universal standards of logic, rationality, and truth. This claim is obviously incompatible with the Christian idea of God, who, as the Creator and Sustainer of all things, is an objectively existing reality, and who, as an omniscient being, has a privileged perspective on the world, grasping the world as it is in the unity of his intellect. There is thus a unity and objectivity to truth which is incompatible with Postmodern relativism. Postmodernism therefore tends to be no more friendly to Christian truth claims than is Enlightenment naturalism. It reduces Christianity to but one voice in a cacophony of competing claims, none of which is objectively true.

### 1.4 *The Rebirth of Christian Philosophy*

Fortunately, Postmodernism was not the only response to the collapse of Verificationism. Since Verificationism had been the principal means of barring the door to metaphysics, the jettisoning of Verificationism meant

<sup>27</sup> William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>28</sup> Tyler Burge, “Philosophy of Language and Mind: 1950–1990,” *Philosophical Review* 101, no. 1 (1992): 49. Arguably the utter collapse of nineteenth century Idealism in both Continental and Anglo-American philosophy created a caesura between Idealist and post-Idealist philosophy which was deeper than the caesura between positivist and post-positivist philosophy, especially in Anglo-American philosophy, which continues to be broadly analytic on both sides of the positivist divide. But the collapse of positivism was more important for the rebirth of Christian philosophy.

that there was no longer anyone at the door to prevent this dreaded and unwelcome visitor from making a reappearance. So the demise of Verificationism has been accompanied by a resurgence of metaphysics in Anglo-American philosophy, along with all the other traditional questions of philosophy which had been suppressed by the Verificationists. Along with this resurgence has come something new and altogether unanticipated: the birth of a new discipline, philosophy of religion, and a renaissance in Christian philosophy.<sup>29</sup>

Although philosophy of religion has been recognized as a delineated second-order discipline of philosophy as far back as G. W. F. Hegel, who lectured on the subject, analytic philosophy of religion is a recent movement of the last half century or so and is one of the most exciting and burgeoning areas of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Its rise was facilitated by the demise of the Verificationist theory of meaning and the rebirth of metaphysics.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> For a nice account from an eyewitness see William Hasker, "Analytic Philosophy of Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 421–446; cf. Zimmerman, "Three Introductory Questions," 1–13. Hasker discerns three phases of the movement: 1955–1965, when the predominant concern was religious language; 1965–1985, when the debate over the coherence and truth of theism dominated the field; and 1985–present, during which philosophical theology blossomed. For a deeper, if cursory, look back see William J. Wainwright, "Introduction," in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, 3–6.

<sup>30</sup> Wolterstorff thinks that a second precondition of the rise of analytic philosophy of religion was the collapse of classical foundationalism through meta-epistemological investigations during the 1960s (Nicholas Wolterstorff, "How Philosophical Theology Became Possible within the Analytic Tradition of Philosophy," in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 158–161). But I suspect that Wolterstorff is putting the cart before the horse. It took decades before the reverberations of those investigations were fully felt in religious epistemology, and by then the renaissance of Christian philosophy was already well on its way. I see the revolution wrought by Reformed epistemology (to be discussed in the sequel) to be the fruit rather than a seed of contemporary philosophy of religion. What we do find fairly early on are challenges to so-called "evidentialism," the Enlightenment conviction that "theistic belief, to be rationally held, must be grounded in evidence, and that such evidence must ultimately consist of that of which one is certain" (158). For example, in a fascinating little comment by a young Alvin Plantinga in 1962, he points out that "there are many beliefs we all hold and hold with no detriment to our rationality for which we cannot produce both evidence and proof that the evidence really is evidence" – for example, belief in other minds (Alvin Plantinga, "The Sceptics' Strategy," in *Faith and the Philosophers*, ed. John Hick [London: Macmillan, 1964], 227; cf. Kai Nielsen's dogged reply: "if I am talking about some question of fact, if I assert that something is true, I imply that I have evidence for what I claim to be true" (Kai Nielsen, "A Sceptic's Reply," in *Faith and the Philosophers*, 231). Plantinga's insight would later bear fruit in his *God and Other Minds* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967]. But challenging evidentialism is a far cry from a searching analysis of classical foundationalism, which was yet to come. Moreover, the defense of theistic belief did not require an abandonment *tout court* of classical foundationalism, for theists could counter the sceptic by defending theistic arguments which were as acceptable as arguments for secular conclusions. Wolterstorff fails to give due account of the resurgence of natural theology as a vital part of contemporary philosophy of religion. Early books in philosophy of religion thus typically included a substantial section on theistic arguments (see, e.g., Daniel J. Bronstein and Harold M. Schulweis, *Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion: A Book of Readings* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1954]; Frederick Ferré, *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967]; George L. Abernethy and Thomas A. Langford, *Philosophy of Religion: A Book of Readings*, 2nd ed. [London: Macmillan, 1968]. Thus, the demise of classical foundationalism could not have been a precondition of the renaissance of Christian philosophy.

Since the late 1960s Christian philosophers have been coming out of the closet and defending the truth of the Christian worldview with philosophically sophisticated arguments in the finest scholarly journals and professional societies.<sup>31</sup> At the same time that theologians were writing God's obituary, a new generation of philosophers was re-discovering his vitality. And the face of Anglo-American philosophy has been transformed as a result. By 1980 *Time* found itself running another major story entitled "Modernizing the Case for God" in which it described the movement among contemporary philosophers to refurbish the traditional arguments for God's existence. *Time* marveled:

In a quiet revolution in thought and argument that hardly anybody could have foreseen only two decades ago, God is making a comeback. Most intriguingly, this is happening not among theologians or ordinary believers, but in the crisp intellectual circles of academic philosophers, where the consensus had long banished the Almighty from fruitful discourse.<sup>32</sup>

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Baruch Brody attributes the dearth of philosophy of religion during the first half of the twentieth century, not only to Verificationism, but also to the fact that "very few working philosophers in the analytic school have had a personal religious commitment"; but by the time of his writing he reports "a growing number of analytical philosophers who have a real personal interest in theological issues and would like to apply to those issues the methods of the analytic school" (Baruch A. Brody, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* [Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974], vii; cf. Philip L. Quinn, "Philosophy of Religion, History of [Addendum]," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Donald M. Borchert [Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006]), 7:497–98. Wolterstorff considers this factor so important that, along with the demise of Verificationism and classical foundationalism, he lists it as one of the three preconditions for the renaissance of Christian philosophy:

"We are touching here on a fundamental cultural difference between the United States. . . and Europe. . . The flowering of philosophical theology. . . has occurred mainly in the United States, this in spite of the fact that analytic philosophy is at least as dominant in such places as England, Scandinavia, and Australia as it is in North America. The reason for the difference is obvious: the United States is far more religious than these other parts of the world. . . . In short, the sociological fact that a good many American philosophers are theists, Christian and Jewish especially, has been a decisive factor in the flourishing of philosophical theology" (Wolterstorff, "How Philosophical Theology Became Possible," 162).

While Wolterstorff is doubtless correct about the critical role played by the United States' greater religiosity, appealing to such sociological factors casts one's explanatory net so wide that one would justifiably include, e.g., the remarkable ministry of Billy Graham and its impact on American culture as a contributing factor to the renaissance of philosophy of religion! We are interested in philosophical, not sociological, reasons for the change. It is interesting that authors citing Wolterstorff's analysis routinely ignore his third precondition (e.g., Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, "Introduction," in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Flint and Rea [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009] 3).

<sup>31</sup> Already in 1962 Abernethy and Langford were able to report, "serious study and discussion of philosophical issues in religion are on the rise. Among scholars in the fields of philosophy and theology there is more interest in the work being done in each other's discipline and more of an effort to take seriously each other's interests than at any time for several decades" (Abernethy and Langford, *Philosophy of Religion* [Preface to the First Edition, 1962], ix). By 1967, H. D. Lewis could say that the philosophy of religion "has become again one of the liveliest interests of philosophers" (H. D. Lewis, "Philosophy of Religion, History of," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards [New York: Macmillan & The Free Press, 1967], 6:285).

<sup>32</sup> "Modernizing the Case for God," *Time*, April 7, 1980, 65–66. Note the oblique reference to Verificationism.

According to the article, the noted American philosopher Roderick Chisholm believed that the reason that atheism was so influential in the previous generation is that the brightest philosophers were atheists; but now, he says, many of the brightest philosophers are theists, and they are using a tough-minded intellectualism in defense of that belief that was formerly lacking on their side of the debate.

Today philosophy of religion flourishes in young journals such as the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *Religious Studies*, *Sophia*, *Faith and Philosophy*, *Philosophia Christi*, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, and other journals devoted to the discipline, not to mention the standard non-specialist journals. Professional societies such as the Society of Christian Philosophers, the Evangelical Philosophical Society, the American Catholic Philosophical Society, not to mention other smaller groups, number thousands of members.<sup>33</sup> Publishing in philosophy of religion is booming, as is evident from the abundance of available textbooks (also testimony to the seemingly insatiable interest among students for courses on the subject). Major publishers now include in their Companion and Handbook series of reference works volumes on philosophy of religion along with volumes on traditional areas of philosophy like metaphysics, epistemology, and so forth.<sup>34</sup>

To provide some feel for the impact of this revolution in Anglo-American philosophy, I quote at some length an article by Quentin Smith which appeared in the fall of 2001 in the secularist journal *Philo*, lamenting what Smith called “the desecularization of academia that evolved in philosophy departments since the late 1960s.” Smith, himself a prominent non-theist philosopher, writes:

By the second half of the twentieth century, universities . . . had become in the main secularized. The standard . . . position in each field. . . assumed or involved arguments for a naturalist world-view; departments of theology or religion aimed to understand the meaning and origins of religious writings, not to develop arguments against naturalism. Analytic philosophers . . . treated theism as an anti-realist or non-cognitivist world-view, requiring the reality, not of a deity, but merely of emotive expressions or certain “forms of life”. . . .

<sup>33</sup> For lists of contemporary professional journals and societies devoted to the philosophy of religion, see Taliaferro, *Evidence and Faith*, 431–432.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021); Chad Meister and Paul Copan, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2007); Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn, eds., *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). For online resources see Klaas J. Kraay, “Contemporary Analytic Thought: 1950–Present,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119009924.eopr0082>.

This is not to say that none of the scholars in the various academic fields were [*sic*] realist theists in their “private lives”; but realist theists, for the most part, excluded their theism from their publications and teaching, in large part because theism . . . was mainly considered to have such a low epistemic status that it did not meet the standards of an “academically respectable” position to hold. The secularization of mainstream academia began to quickly unravel upon the publication of Plantinga’s influential book, *God and Other Minds*, in 1967. It became apparent to the philosophical profession that this book displayed that realist theists were not outmatched by naturalists in terms of the most valued standards of analytic philosophy: conceptual precision, rigor of argumentation, technical erudition, and an in-depth defense of an original world-view. This book, followed seven years later by Plantinga’s even more impressive book, *The Nature of Necessity*, made it manifest that a realist theist was writing at the highest qualitative level of analytic philosophy, on the same playing field as Carnap, Russell, Moore, Grünbaum, and other naturalists. . . .

Naturalists passively watched as realist versions of theism, most influenced by Plantinga’s writings, began to sweep through the philosophical community, until today perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians. Although many theists do not work in the area of the philosophy of religion, so many of them do work in this area that there are now over five philosophy journals devoted to theism or the philosophy of religion. . . .

. . . theists in other fields tend to compartmentalize their theistic beliefs from their scholarly work; they rarely assume and never argue for theism in their scholarly work. If they did, they would be committing academic suicide or, more exactly, their articles would quickly be rejected. . . . But in philosophy, it became, almost overnight, ‘academically respectable’ to argue for theism, making philosophy a favored field of entry for the most intelligent and talented theists entering academia today.<sup>35</sup>

Smith concludes, “God is not ‘dead’ in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments.”<sup>36</sup>

This is the testimony of a prominent non-theist philosopher to the transformation that has taken place before his eyes in Anglo-American philosophy. Doubtless, Smith is exaggerating when he estimates that one-quarter to one-third of American philosophers are theists;<sup>37</sup> but what his

<sup>35</sup> Quentin Smith, “The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism,” *Philo* 4, no. 2 (2001): 196–197.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, “Metaphilosophy of Naturalism,” 198.

<sup>37</sup> Still, caution should be exercised in citing PhilPapers surveys to the effect that only 16% of philosophy faculty or PhDs accept or lean towards theism (Kevin Timpe, “On Analytic Theology,” *Scientia et Fides* 3, no. 2 [2015]: 14). The claim that Anglo-American philosophy has experienced a renaissance of Christian

estimations do reveal is the *perceived impact* of Christian philosophers upon this field. The number of Christians among graduate students in philosophy is significantly higher than among current faculty, which suggests that the revolution will continue.

As a result of the work of Christian philosophers genuine advance has been made on important issues like the epistemic status of belief in God, the coherence of theism, and the problem of evil, so that questions which dominated earlier discussions have been resolved or have yielded to new questions.<sup>38</sup> For example, along with the alleged meaninglessness of religious language, the so-called presumption of atheism, according to which atheism is a sort of default position, which so dominated mid-twentieth century philosophy of religion, is now a relic of the past. Similarly, few philosophers today defend the so-called logical version of the problem of evil, which claims that God and the suffering in the world are logically incompatible. The discussion of the coherence of theism, which analyzes the principal attributes traditionally ascribed to God, such as aseity, necessity, simplicity, eternity, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, has been an especially fertile field of exploration by Christian philosophers, so that anti-theistic critiques of these attributes have proved to be positively beneficial.

The renaissance of Christian philosophy has not been merely defensive, however. Rather it has also been accompanied by a resurgence of interest

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philosophy should not be misunderstood as the claim that Christian philosophers have come to occupy a significant percentage of faculty positions at tier 1 universities, as Graham Oppy would require (Graham Oppy, "Philosophy, Religion, and Worldview," in *Christian Philosophy: Conceptions, Continuations, and Challenges*, ed. J. Aaron Simmons [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019], 246–251). After all, as Oppy recognizes, in 2015 there were around 400 religiously affiliated American universities and colleges, as well as some 200 seminaries in which philosophers are employed to teach philosophy. Puzzled that neither I nor any of my dozen philosophical colleagues at Talbot School of Theology received the PhilPapers survey, I discovered that these surveys were mailed to less than 2,000 persons in 99 "leading departments of philosophy" (only 62 of which were in the U.S.)! Christian colleges, universities, and seminaries were virtually overlooked. Less than half of the philosophers targeted responded (47.2%) to the survey, for a total of 931 philosophers in Europe, Australasia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Only 47 of the philosophers targeted had philosophy of religion as their area of specialization. See <http://philpapers.org/surveys/depts.html>, archived at <https://perma.cc/NNY2-RKST>. Citing a more recent survey showing that the percentage of theists among philosophers of religion is triple the percentage of theists among philosophers more generally, Kraay suggests, incredibly, that theists are significantly overrepresented in analytic philosophy of religion, rather than that theists are significantly *underrepresented* in analytic philosophy as a whole (Kraay, "Contemporary Analytic Thought," 469)! Hasker rightly reflects, "the status and influence within the profession of Christian philosophy are significantly higher than was the case in, say, 1955. If this is so, it seems appropriate to describe the process by which this came about as a surge. It certainly has seemed like that to many of us who have observed the process unfolding. Indeed, it seems implausible to attribute the widespread impression that a surge has occurred to a collective delusion among a considerable number of philosophers, some of whom are far from welcoming the phenomenon" (William Hasker, "Responding to Challenges," in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. J. A. Simmons, 288–289.)

<sup>38</sup> Contrast, e.g., the very negative attacks on "supernaturalist religious beliefs" anthologized by Steven M. Cahn, ed., *Philosophy of Religion*, Sources in Contemporary Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), esp. 1–3.

in natural theology, that branch of theology which seeks to prove God's existence apart from the resources of authoritative divine revelation. All of the traditional arguments for God's existence, such as the cosmological, teleological, axiological, and ontological arguments, not to mention creative, new arguments, find intelligent and articulate defenders on the contemporary philosophical scene.<sup>39</sup> The important *Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* features lengthy defenses of the most prominent theistic arguments by leading philosophers of religion.<sup>40</sup> Alvin Plantinga, perhaps the most important living philosopher of religion, has defended what he calls "two dozen (or so) theistic arguments."<sup>41</sup> Plantinga's contribution to natural theology is now celebrated and advanced in a recent collaborative volume *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God's Existence*.<sup>42</sup> Of course, there are replies and counter-replies to all of these arguments, and no one imagines that a consensus will be reached. But theists welcome this debate. For the very presence of the debate is itself a sign of how healthy and vibrant a theistic worldview is today.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> In updating the old *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entries on philosophy of religion, Robert Adams could report, "The grounds proposed for belief or disbelief in the existence of God have naturally claimed at least as much analytical attention as the attributes of God. . . . the state of debate has changed significantly since 1960. One striking change is that the traditional arguments for the existence of God, then widely dismissed, even by theologians, as hopelessly discredited, have many defenders at the turn of the twenty-first century" (Robert M. Adams, "Philosophy of Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Donald M. Borchert [Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006], 480). See the partial list of contemporary proponents of various theistic arguments in Taliaferro, *Evidence and Faith*, 437.

<sup>40</sup> William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). See now as well Colin Ruloff and Peter Horban, eds., *Contemporary Arguments in Natural Theology: God and Rational Belief* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

<sup>41</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments" (lecture presented at the 33rd Annual Philosophy Conference, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, October 23–25, 1986).

<sup>42</sup> Trent Dougherty and Jerry Walls, eds., *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>43</sup> So Taliaferro reports that "there is a very large literature now on the articulation and critique of arguments for the existence of God" (Taliaferro, *Evidence and Faith*, 407). I am therefore astonished that Wolterstorff should assert that "analytic philosophical theologians have shown relatively little interest in providing rational grounding for their fundamental theistic convictions . . . . attempts at rationally grounding theistic belief have been a relatively minor part of recent philosophical theology" (Wolterstorff, "How Philosophical Theology Became Possible," 163, 166). Such a claim cannot be defended by explaining that "the dominant attitude has quite clearly been that nothing of any great epistemological importance hangs on whether or not one can give arguments for God's existence" (163), for that attitude represents a rejection of evidentialism, not natural theology. As a case in point, Wolterstorff's fellow Reformed epistemologist Alvin Plantinga judges that the theistic arguments, while unnecessary for rational belief in God, succeed in making it more probable than not that God exists (Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 131). Neither did the medieval philosophical theologians, with whom Wolterstorff contrasts contemporary philosophical theologians, think that warranted Christian belief requires theistic proofs, for they held that the conclusions of theistic arguments that are accessible mainly to scholars are examples of truths which faith proposes but reason is able to recover.

### 1.5 *The Birth of Analytic Theology*

One of the most noteworthy recent developments in philosophy of religion has been the ingress of Christian philosophers into areas normally considered the province of systematic theologians. In particular, many Christian philosophers have taken up a share of the task of formulating and defending coherent statements of Christian doctrine.<sup>44</sup> Although in 1955 Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre chose “*New Essays in Philosophical Theology*” as the title of their collection of essays, the contributors to that volume were, in fact, largely concerned with generic philosophy of religion, rather than specific doctrines.<sup>45</sup> William Alston could report in 1967 that “In works on the philosophy of religion one finds little discussion of relatively special doctrines that are peculiar to a given religion.”<sup>46</sup> In 1984 Thomas Morris, reflecting on the “near total lack of any contemporary philosophical attention to the claims and commitments special to the Christian faith,” organized a conference at the University of Notre Dame to address such doctrines as the Trinity and incarnation and ideas of sin, atonement, and sanctification.<sup>47</sup> The published papers were intended to represent “the beginnings of an exciting new direction of philosophical exploration – a careful and sustained conceptual investigation into the distinctive doctrines and concerns of the Christian faith, as expressed in its scriptures, creeds, conciliar decrees, and other seminal documents.”<sup>48</sup> Today the most interesting and important work in exploring philosophical issues in systematic theology is being done, not by traditional theologians, but by analytic philosophers of

<sup>44</sup> Christian Doctrine is defined by Jaroslav Pelikan as “what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the Word of God” (Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971], 1). This definition properly permits doctrine, given the diversity of the church, to be false and also allows for non-Christian doctrine, e.g., Muslim doctrine.

<sup>45</sup> The editors explain:

“We should like to have used the expression ‘Philosophy of Religion’ for its analogy with ‘Philosophy of History’, ‘Philosophy of Science’, and so on: since the questions discussed here are philosophical and bear the same sort of relation to religious thought and practice as the questions of the philosophy of history and of science bear to the thought and practice of working scientists and historians; the relation, that is, of arising out of or being posed by these empirical disciplines, while being themselves philosophical and not factual questions. . . . But this expression has become, and seems likely for some time to remain, associated with Idealist attempts to present philosophical prolegomena to theistic theology. So we have adopted as an alternative the expression ‘Philosophical Theology’; which has a welcome analogy to ‘Philosophical Ethics’ and ‘Philosophical Aesthetics’. . . .” (Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, “Preface,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre [New York: Macmillan, 1955], viii.)

That Flew and MacIntyre could fear that philosophy of religion might be associated with Idealism shows how incredibly primitive, i.e., early, these essays were. That concern proved to be ill-founded.

<sup>46</sup> William P. Alston, “Philosophy of Religion, Problems of,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Donald M. Borchert, (1967) (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006), 500.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, University of Notre Dame Studies in the Philosophy of Religion 5 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), ix.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas V. Morris, “Introduction,” in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 1.

religion.<sup>49</sup> The ingress of Christian philosophers into systematic theology has served to spawn a new movement within Anglo-American theology itself. Professional theologians employing the techniques of analytic philosophy have styled themselves “analytic theologians” and their field “analytic theology.”<sup>50</sup> Only a “pipe dream” as recently as 2006, today analytic theology has become a reality, “one of the most significant developments in recent theological history.”<sup>51</sup>

It is impossible to avoid the impression that many Christian philosophers were, and are, fairly disgruntled with the state of contemporary theology and see themselves as attempting to help rectify the situation.<sup>52</sup> Swinburne has complained:

It is one of the intellectual tragedies of our age that when philosophy in English-speaking countries has developed high standards of argument

<sup>49</sup> Plantinga is not alone in opining that “the best work in philosophical theology – in the English-speaking world and over the last quarter-century – has been done not by theologians but by philosophers” (Alvin Plantinga, “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998], 341).

<sup>50</sup> See Michael C. Rea, *Essays in Analytic Theology*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1, who claims with Oliver Crisp credit for the term. A word of caution is in order: systematic theologians may speak of “dogmatics in the analytical tradition,” referring not to modern analytic philosophy, but to a “method in which doctrinal exposition is oriented toward practical issues concerning human salvation and destiny rather than speculative questions concerning God and God’s decrees” (John Webster, “Introduction: Systematic Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5), a method almost the opposite of analytic philosophical theology!

<sup>51</sup> In the words of three of its most enthusiastic proponents, Oliver D. Crisp, James M. Arcadi, and Jordan Wessling, *The Nature and Promise of Analytic Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 67. Analytic theology thus fulfills David Brown’s early call for “nothing less than the founding of a new discipline of philosophical theology (or the widening of the horizons of the philosophy of religion) to apply more widely the type of penetration of theology by philosophy” illustrated by his own treatment of the Trinity (David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* [London: Duckworth, 1985], x; cf. 305, 308). For bibliographies see both Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise* and the *T&T Clark Handbook to Analytic Theology*, ed. James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner, Jr. (London: T & T Clark, 2021). The fact that a comprehensive bibliography should even be attempted is testimony to how young this movement is.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen Davis suggests that one reason for the move of philosophers into theology is the dissatisfaction with the current state of the discipline. Christian philosophers find the work of such thinkers as Anselm, Aquinas, or Calvin “typically to be more careful, stimulating, rigorous, and faithful to the Christian tradition than the work of many contemporary theologians” (Stephen T. Davis, *Christian Philosophical Theology* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 4). William Abraham has denounced the “confusion,” “conceptual problems,” and “intellectual sloppiness that bedevil contemporary systematic theology” (William J. Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays*, 55). He also complains that “so little doctrinal content was left by the time the theologians were finished speaking” that “much modern and contemporary theology is really the invention of various forms of post-Christian religion” (57). Once “the deep truths of the Gospel and the central elements of the Nicene creed . . . constitutive of the Christian faith” have been abandoned, then interest in philosophical reflection on such doctrines is bound to atrophy (57). By contrast, “The confusion that abounds in contemporary systematic theology is likely to diminish if theologians . . . come to terms with the virtues of the analytic tradition” (55). Cf. his even more blistering comments in William J. Abraham, “Turning Philosophical Water into Theological Wine,” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 1, no. 1 (2013): 3. Hasker speaks for many when he opines, “analytic philosophy of religion . . . offers the best means yet available for clarifying the meaning of religious claims and for assessing the reasons for and truth of those claims. Those who are uninterested in clarity and truth as applied to religious assertions will naturally find this style of philosophizing uncongenial. Those who do care about such matters may well find it indispensable” (Hasker, “Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” 443; and more recently, Hasker, “Responding to Challenges,” 303–304).

and clear thinking, the style of theological writing has been largely influenced by the Continental philosophy of Existentialism, which despite its considerable other merits, has been distinguished by a very loose and sloppy style of argument. If argument has a place in theology, large-scale theology needs clear and rigorous argument. The point was very well grasped by Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, by Berkeley, Butler, and Paley. It is high time for theology to return to their standards.<sup>53</sup>

Randall Rauser is, if possible, even harsher in his verdict on contemporary theology and the impotence of Continental philosophy to provide requisite guidance.<sup>54</sup>

Little wonder, then, that, as Michael Rea reported in 2009, “by and large, the established figures in both [philosophy and theology] don’t even view mutual conversation as worth pursuing. They ignore each other.”<sup>55</sup> Even today analytic theology is pursued by a relatively small number of theologians, who seem eager to reach out to their colleagues in theology and religious studies.<sup>56</sup>

Why Continental thinkers have resisted analytic approaches to theology is a matter of discussion, but there seems to be a consensus that it due in various ways to the lingering shadow of Immanuel Kant.<sup>57</sup> The skepticism

<sup>53</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 7.

<sup>54</sup> Much of contemporary theology, he says, is b.s., where “b.s.” abbreviates a technical term denoting discourse involving fakery or nonsense. Analytic philosophical method is the best antidote to theological b.s. Rauser declares:

Academic theology requires its own checks and balances and these are found in the rigorous demands of closely reasoned analysis. As Mark Evans puts it, ‘an anti-bullshit discursive culture may develop if there is greater practice of, and respect for, the techniques of a good old-fashioned analytic-philosophical style, which prizes clarity of exposition and rigor of analysis in pursuit of truth and the “best argument” objectively understood.’

<sup>55</sup> [Mark] Evans, “[The] Rhetoric of Bullshit,” [in *Bullshit and Philosophy*, ed. Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 2006)] 200” (Randal Rauser, “Theology as a Bull Session,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays*, 83).

Unfortunately, he thinks, due to the lack of such checks and balances within Continental thought, there has been no counterpart in theology to the flourishing of philosophical theology in the analytic tradition. “It is no surprise,” muses William Abraham, “that theology has become thoroughly marginalized if not outright dismissed as a serious intellectual enterprise within the contemporary university” (Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” 58). Such remarks seem to illustrate Zimmerman’s observation that when Christian philosophers in the analytic tradition and Christian theologians do interact, the results can be “somewhat acrimonious,” featuring “unpleasant public exchanges between philosophers and theologians, and few signs that either group thought they had much to learn from the other” (Zimmerman, “Three Introductory Questions,” 3–4).

<sup>56</sup> Michael C. Rea, “Introduction,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays*, 2. European theologian Daniel von Wachter observes that there is a great divide today between what he calls Schleiermacherian theologians and analytic philosophers of religion. The Schleiermacherians consider the analytic philosophers to be naïve, while the analytic philosophers consider the Schleiermacherians’ hostility to the supernatural to be irrational and think that the Schleiermacherians are lacking in good arguments (Daniel von Wachter, “Protestant Theology,” in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul Copan, Routledge Philosophy Companions [London: Routledge, 2007], 496–497).

<sup>56</sup> See William Wood, *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>57</sup> Rea and Wolterstorff point to different factors contributing to the antipathy of Continental thought to analytic philosophy of religion, but they are united in seeing the Kantian rejection of so-called onto-theology as a crucial factor. It is important to understand that “onto-theology” does *not* mean ontological realism with

of David Hume concerning miracles likewise continues to powerfully influence biblical and systematic theologians.<sup>58</sup> There is an irony in this reliance upon these two philosophical figures, noted by Morris:

What is particularly interesting about the references theologians make to Kant or Hume is that most often we find the philosopher merely mentioned. . . , but we rarely, if ever, see an account of precisely which arguments of his are supposed to have accomplished the alleged demolition of cognitivism, and exactly how they may be supposed to have had that effect. In fact, I must confess to never having seen in the writings of any contemporary theologian the exposition of a single argument from either Hume or Kant, or any other historical figure, for that matter, which comes anywhere near to demolishing, or even irreparably damaging traditional theistic metaphysics, historical Christian doctrine, or the epistemology of what we might call ‘theological realism’, the construal of theology as a discipline whose intent is to represent religious realities as they, in fact, are.<sup>59</sup>

More generally, Wolterstorff suggests – quite plausibly it seems – that one of the reasons that philosophical theology has not flourished in the continental tradition is that “continental philosophers, unlike their analytic counterparts, are still preoccupied with the traditional question of the classical modern philosophers,” namely, “the limits of thought and judgment.”<sup>60</sup> Continental theologians remain Kantian in their denial of

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respect to theology. Rather, as Wolterstorff explains, in Kant’s own usage in *The Critique of Pure Reason* A632 = B660, onto-theology is a theology that is based solely upon ontological arguments for God’s existence by means of pure reason using transcendental concepts alone. It excludes not only divine revelation but even a posteriori arguments of natural theology (Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible,” 167). So defined, it is obvious to anyone with even a modicum of familiarity with the contemporary literature that analytic philosophy of religion is not onto-theology. But contemporary theologians are not using “onto-theology” in the original Kantian sense. Rather, as Rea explains, “onto-theology” is used to characterize a theology that (i) treats God primarily as an explanatory posit, thereby enabling human reason to give ultimate explanations, and (ii) presupposes that reason is a reliable tool for arriving at clear knowledge of God, so that reasoning about God can ultimately remove divine mystery (Rea, “Introduction,” 9). Once again, however, while some analytic philosophers of religion are proponents of natural theology and so embrace God as the ultimate explanation for facts like the existence of the world and the objectivity of moral values, God is for them much more than an explanatory posit, and the field of analytic philosophy of religion is vastly wider than natural theology; and while many analytic philosophers of religion do believe that reason can yield some clear knowledge of God, I do not know of any who would say that it is possible or even desirable to expel divine mystery. Onto-theology is, frankly, a bogeyman of which we need not be afraid.

<sup>58</sup> For example, Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 12; Bart Ehrman, “Historical Jesus” (The Teaching Company, 2000), pt. 2, p. 50.

<sup>59</sup> Morris, “Introduction,” 3–4.

<sup>60</sup> Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible,” 157. Rea thinks that the problem goes deeper than just the limits of knowledge. The problem is not just that we are unable to attain clear knowledge of God but that the effort to do so “implicitly denies the transcendence that theology ought to respect and aims at a goal that, if accomplished, would undermine the life of faith and would thus work at cross purposes with the true goal of theology” (Rea, “Introduction,” 11). I find this concern enormously presumptuous. By what right do continental theologians tell me what would undermine my life of faith, when I find a clear conception of God to deepen my worship and awe of his person and so enrich my faith? How could my conceiving of God as that than which a greater cannot be conceived, a being beyond full human

knowledge of God mediated by human reason. Moreover, continental theologians and philosophers have also thought that the demise of classical foundationalism leads inevitably to a post-modernist relativism concerning truth and knowledge.<sup>61</sup> The latter inference, as we shall see, is just based on misunderstanding, and as for the former there are no good arguments for the Kantian denial of the knowledge of God.

Rea also seeks to identify various reasons why continental thinkers reject, not only the aims, but also the style of analytic philosophy. For example, continental thinkers complain that analytic philosophy prioritizes clarity and precision at the expense of everything else, restricting our choice of topics and encouraging the use of the wrong rhetorical tools. Analytic philosophy ignores the fact that sometimes in order to attain wisdom and understanding we have to rely substantively on metaphor and other literary tropes.<sup>62</sup> Such a complaint betrays ignorance of analytic philosophy. To cite one example, Stephen Yablo's figuratism is an attempt to deal with the alleged metaphysical implications of true mathematical discourse for the reality of abstract objects precisely by appeal to the use of existential metaphors.<sup>63</sup> In order to put forth a convincing case for a metaphorical interpretation Yablo must prioritize clarity and precision, lest his figuratism be subverted by ambiguity or invalidity. Such clarity and precision come, not at the expense of everything else, but in order to justify our substantively relying on metaphor to express the truth. In philosophical theology, Richard Swinburne emphasizes the indispensability of metaphor and other forms of figurative language for understanding divine revelation, but he hardly does so at the sacrifice of clarity and precision.<sup>64</sup>

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comprehension, possibly impugn his transcendence? Why should I pay attention to what continental theologians tell me is the true aim of theology?

<sup>61</sup> Wolterstorff, "How Philosophical Theology Became Possible," 160. Rea also points to a perceived link between the rejection of foundationalism and post-modern theology (Rea, "Introduction," 12). Rea explains that the rejection of classical foundationalism need not be followed by postmodern skepticism but may be succeeded by our admission of additional basic sources of knowledge, such as religious experience, along with the sources recognized by the classical foundationalist. See also Flint and Rea, "Introduction," 2, who similarly think that two strains of thought have tended to choke out philosophical theology among continental philosophers and systematic theologians: (i) "Some were so gripped by the transcendence of God that they came to think that God was beyond all human categories, even Being itself," and (ii) "Some were gripped more by human limitations, and came to despair of the possibility of arriving via philosophical methods at general, universally valid theoretical understanding of anything at all."

<sup>62</sup> Rea, "Introduction," 18.

<sup>63</sup> Yablo's works include: "Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 72 (1998): 229–261; "A Paradox of Existence," in *Empty Names, Fiction, and the Puzzles of Non-Existence*, ed. Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2000), 275–312; "Go Figure: A Path through Fictionalism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25 (2001): 72–102; "Abstract Objects: A Case Study," *Philosophical Issues* 12 (2002): 220–240; "The Myth of the Seven," in *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*, ed. Mark Eli Kalderon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 88–115.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), v, 44–48. Cf. Arthur Holmes' rejection very early on of the claim that we must "reduce all Biblical analogy and metaphor and symbol and poetry and connotation to logically univocal as well as universal form," for such translations cannot be carried out without "risking cognitive loss" (Arthur F. Holmes,

Rea also observes that some contemporary theologians object to the style of analytic philosophy because doctrinal claims do not express determinate propositions and there is no guarantee that they will do so even once they have been interpreted. A particular claim might be an evocative metaphor with very minimal, if any, propositional content.<sup>65</sup> But such a possibility cannot serve as a general proscription of analytic philosophizing about religious subjects. Doctrinal claims will need to be examined on a case by case basis to see what, if any, propositional content they express. It was the error of the logical positivists, one will recall, to make a blanket claim that theological statements assert no propositions, and we should be foolish, indeed, to repeat their error. We shall want good arguments in every case that the doctrinal claim in question lacks propositional content, and merely raising the specter of onto-theology will not do the trick. We may be surprised at the rich propositional content of many doctrinal claims.

Finally, Rea notes that some contemporary theologians claim that metaphysical theorizing about God is idolatrous. When we try to answer the question, “Does God exist?”, metaphysicians will inevitably analyze the concept of God in a way that illegitimately privileges some aspects of the concept over others. Talk of the God of the philosophers thus replaces talk about God. Therefore, the God of analytic metaphysical discourse is an idol.<sup>66</sup> This objection is simplistic. Analytic philosophers of religion fully realize that God can be conceived in a variety of ways which complement one another. For example, the argument from contingency leads to a metaphysically necessary being that is the sufficient reason for the existence of everything else, the *kalām* cosmological argument leads to a first, uncaused, transcendent, enormously powerful, personal creator of the universe, the fine-tuning argument leads to an incomprehensibly intelligent designer of the cosmos who established the laws of nature and set their parameters, the moral argument leads to a personal being who is the paradigm of moral goodness and the giver of the moral law, and so on. Such conceptions of God may, in fact, be much richer than the ordinary language meaning of “God” and so expand our vision of who God is. Post-modern theology, by contrast, threatens to stunt our understanding of God.

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“Ordinary Language Analysis and Theological Method,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11, no. 2 [1968]: 133).

<sup>65</sup> Rea, “Introduction,” 22.

<sup>66</sup> Rea, “Introduction,” 22–23.

It has been observed that never since the high Middle Ages has there been such a flourishing of philosophical theology as in our day.<sup>67</sup> This makes the time ripe for the writing of a systematic philosophical theology.

## 2 Delineating the Disciplines

But what, exactly, is systematic philosophical theology, and how does it relate to the various other disciplines we have mentioned? These are questions explored by what Rea, on the analogy of metaethics or metaontology, calls metatheology, reflection on the nature and methods of theology as a discipline.<sup>68</sup> Answering these questions will help us to set our goals more clearly.

### 2.1 *Systematic Theology*

To begin with systematic theology, the expression “systematic theology,” like “history” or “philosophy,” has various referents. In my opening paragraph of this Prolegomenon, it refers to a literary corpus, as in “Pannenberg’s 3-volume systematic theology.” Similarly, it can refer to a theologian’s thought system, as in the sentence “Natural theology plays a significant role in Swinburne’s systematic theology.” In both of these cases systematic theology is propositional in nature, consisting of assertions or statements made by the relevant person. On the other hand, “systematic theology” may refer to an academic field or discipline, as when we say, “Gregory is studying systematic theology at Cambridge.” Such a general use of the expression does not tie systematic theology to any particular person. Sometimes “systematic theology” is used to designate a task or activity which the theologian pursues, as in “Doing systematic theology well requires not only biblical expertise but also logical training.” All of these uses of the term are common and therefore legitimate. In what follows, we shall not try to differentiate among them, since the context usually makes clear how the expression is being used.

If we think of systematic theology as an academic discipline or task, what are some of its determining characteristics? We might try to answer this question either definitionally or sociologically, that is to say, we might try to identify certain essential properties of the field or we might look to the

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<sup>67</sup> Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible,” 155.

<sup>68</sup> Rea, *Essays in Analytic Theology*, 1:2.

way in which the field is commonly pursued by its practitioners.<sup>69</sup> The problem with trying to characterize the field definitionally is that the essence of a field, if it is not to be highly controversial, will be so thin as to be largely uninformative. For example, it doubtless belongs to the essence of philosophy of religion that it involves philosophizing about religion rather than, say, chemistry, but beyond that it is difficult to say much more that will not be contestable. Characterizing a field sociologically need not make us a prisoner to faddishness, as some fear, for we may take the long view and see how theologians have pursued their field for centuries, and not merely according to current fashion. If what we are calling systematic theology does not resemble anything that has at any time been practiced by recognized systematic theologians, then we are in all likelihood pursuing a study, for example, biblical theology, which, however worthy, just is not systematic theology.

So what does systematic theology look like when pursued by professional theologians? As theology, its subject matter is God and things considered in relation to God.<sup>70</sup> So, for example, theological anthropology, as contrasted with secular anthropology, will consider man insofar as he stands in relation to God. What, then, makes theology systematic? Four features come to mind:

1. It is organized or structured, typically according to certain themes.
2. It draws upon both authoritative Scriptures as well as all relevant secular disciplines.

<sup>69</sup> See Eleonore Stump, "Athens and Jerusalem: The Relationship of Philosophy and Theology," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 1, no. 1(2013): 46–47, who uses "doctrinal" rather than "definitional" to draw the distinction. Stump's own attempt to designate the essence of philosophy and theology respectively turns out to be not only idiosyncratic, but erroneous, based as it is on the hermeneutical fallacy of taking the meaning of words to be given by their etymology. Tellingly, when Stump rejects the post-modernist construal of philosophy, her appeal is sociological: "many contemporary philosophers have not been inclined to adopt the postmodern attitude" (49).

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Aquinas *Summa theologiae* Ia.1.7. Interestingly, Flint and Rea characterize philosophical theology in terms almost identical to Aquinas': Philosophical theology is aimed primarily at "theoretical understanding of the nature and attributes of God, and God's relationship to the world and things in the world" (Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, "Introduction," *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 1). Cf. John Webster's description: "Systematic theology attempts a conceptual articulation of Christian claims about God and everything else in relation to God, characterized by comprehensiveness and coherence" (Webster, "Introduction," 2). Obviously, systematic theology does not deal with literally "everything else." The point is rather that the things it treats are viewed from a theological angle.

For Aquinas the focus on God as the subject of theology is ultimately connected to his view that God knows creatures only insofar as he knows himself as their cause. Thus the knowledge of God imparts knowledge of creatures. We can relinquish that doctrine while recognizing that theology is interested in creatures from a specifically theological viewpoint. See also Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:4–6. Pannenberg too quickly assumes that God's relatedness to creation is secured by the incarnation, for this assumption depends upon Thomas' implausible doctrine of divine simplicity, according to which "in its created nature everything that is distinct from God is related to God as the source and goal of its being. But God is not similarly related to created things" (1:6).

3. It aims at completeness, enunciating at least the broad outlines of a synoptic worldview.
4. It offers and defends, insofar as it can, a logically coherent formulation of its worldview.

Notice that systematic theology so characterized need not be Christian. During the Middle Ages Islamic theology and philosophy were flourishing enterprises in Muslim lands, often at loggerheads with each other. Indeed, it was Islamic theology that finally vanquished philosophy from Muslim intellectual culture. Given that theology concerns first and foremost God, non-theistic religions like Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta Hinduism may have systematic religious worldviews, but they cannot properly be labeled theology. But within the monotheistic traditions there can be non-Christian systematic theologies. Obviously, our project is Christian systematic theology.

## 2.2 *Systematic Philosophical Theology*

So what is it for systematic theology to be systematic *philosophical* theology? The adjective “philosophical” serves simply as a means of emphasis, underlining the need for a logically coherent formulation and defense of its worldview. In virtually every topic area it treats, such as doctrine of God, doctrine of Christ, doctrine of creation, and so on, Christian systematic theology raises profound and often difficult philosophical questions that the systematic theologian must address. This feature serves to differentiate systematic theology from biblical theology, which does not aspire to systematicity, as characterized above.<sup>71</sup> According to James Meade, “Biblical

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<sup>71</sup> On the distinction between biblical and systematic theology see the interesting discussion by C. Kevin Rowe and Richard B. Hays, “Biblical Studies,” in *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 435–455. The distinction between biblical theology and dogmatics goes back to Johann Philipp Gabler in 1787. Gabler separated cleanly the discipline of historical exegesis from dogmatic and systematic theology; assigned a proper order to the two disciplines: first historical exegesis, then systematic reflection on the basis of the results; and designated the contents of the Bible as “religion” in contrast to academic “theology.” Although it is easy to criticize the ways in which Gabler drew these distinctions, it is hard to deny that he was basically correct.

Rowe and Hays opine that so long as theology was conceived in terms of systematically ordered propositions, the biblical narratives appeared as limited and limiting texts, inconvenient in their crude particularity. Theology had to be somehow distilled from the raw material of these texts, and the relation between descriptive biblical study and systematic theological discourse was a fairly distant one. But if the task of theology is understood in the post-liberal mode as the reflective re-narration of the community’s identity-defining story at a particular historical moment, then the biblical writers were practicing theology in a way that is exemplary for theologians at any time.

Rowe and Hays’ conclusion is not only inaccurate but beside the point. Of course, if we redefine “systematic theology” so that it no longer consists of systematically ordered propositions, then Gabler’s distinctions may no longer apply. In any case it is inaccurate to characterize systematic theology as being opposed to the historical particularity of the biblical documents, for true historical statements (e.g., “Pontius Pilate was the Procurator of Judea from AD 26–36”) are universally and (with appropriate tense changes) always

theology seeks to identify and understand the Bible's theological message and themes, that is what the Bible says about God, and God's relationship to all creation, especially to humankind."<sup>72</sup> It is striking how similar these themes are to those of systematic theology. What is lacking here is the input of historical and philosophical theology. Ben Witherington emphasizes that biblical theology is grounded quite strictly in the exegesis of the biblical texts and their clearest implications and is therefore neither historical theology nor any sort of systematic theology.<sup>73</sup> Biblical theology restricts itself in various respects, treating, for example, Paul's doctrine of the atonement or, more generally, a biblical doctrine of the atonement, without seeking to formulate and defend a coherent theory of the atonement. Usually untrained in philosophy, biblical theologians rightly restrict themselves to exegetical issues on which they are expert. Brevard Childs distinguishes descriptive biblical theology, which involves a historical study of the views of the biblical authors themselves, and constructive biblical theology, which attempts to formulate a modern theology compatible with the Bible.<sup>74</sup> Constructive biblical theology represents a step in the direction of systematic theology. Analytic philosophy can be surprisingly helpful to biblical theologians in

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true. So events in the life of the historical Jesus, for example, may be determinative for Christology. While the distance between the deliverances of biblical theology (e.g., God's being almighty) and systematic theological formulations (e.g., divine omnipotence) may sometimes be great, that need not be always the case (e.g., substitutionary atonement). We may agree with Rowe and Hays that every exegete has dogmatic interests and presuppositions without thereby collapsing the distinction between biblical and systematic theology.

Their argument that the desire to study the New Testament (NT) free of dogmatic decisions involves us in a basic contradiction, since to speak of various texts as "the New Testament" is in fact to make a dogmatic judgement, need not be taken seriously. The NT, like the Old Testament (OT), presents itself to us as a literary reality, so that no dogmatic decision, say, about canonicity or inspiration, is required to ask what this book (or portions of it) teaches. Failure to pursue biblical theology without such a desire leads to bias and proof-texting and subverts the Bible's corrective role. Anthony Thiselton rightly emphasizes that systematic theology "cannot be true to its biblical foundations unless it takes with utter seriousness *both exegesis of specific passages and the historical context and conditioning* of most biblical utterances (Anthony C. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015], 13).

<sup>72</sup> James K. Meade, *Biblical Theology: Issues, Method, and Themes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>73</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Biblical Theology: The Convergence of the Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 8.

<sup>74</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 3. Seen in this light, Wayne Grudem's popular *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994) is not really a systematic theology at all, but rather a constructive biblical theology. For Grudem defines systematic theology as "*any study that answers the question, 'What does the whole Bible teach us today?' about any given topic,*" and so he deliberately refrains from emphasizing "historical theology or philosophical theology or apologetics" (21). Grudem's denial that his volume is biblical theology rests upon construing "biblical theology" to refer to "tracing the historical development of doctrines throughout the Bible" (22). There is no reason to think that a biblical theologian cannot collect and summarize, as Grudem's systematic theologian is said to do, "the teaching of all the biblical passages on a particular subject" (23). I once criticized Grudem's treatment of divine eternity for its lack of philosophical depth; but given Grudem's self-conscious restriction of his book to summarizing biblical teaching, I now see that such a critique was unfair. His book is simply mistitled.

virtue of its emphasis on conceptual clarification.<sup>75</sup> Systematic theologians will draw upon the work of biblical theologians as one of their resources for the enunciation of a biblically, as well as philosophically, adequate Christian worldview.

It will be obvious from what I have written in the previous section that I am firmly committed to analytic philosophy's being the philosophy employed in systematic philosophical theology. I agree with the previously expressed opinion that continental philosophy is much too woolly and wild to be of significant help in the formulation and defense of coherent Christian doctrine, and theologians' reliance on it has impaired their theology. While analytic philosophy may resist close definition, it may be accurately thought of, not as a list of substantive philosophical claims such as naturalism, mind/body physicalism, mathematical Platonism, mereological universalism, epistemological foundationalism, moral realism, and so on, but rather as a method for exploring such difficult questions.<sup>76</sup> It prizes clarity of definition, conceptual analysis, clear formulation of premises and arguments, and logical validity and coherence.<sup>77</sup> As Michael Rea observes, these seem to be "fairly commonsensical virtues" that we all recognize:

<sup>75</sup> For example, in distinguishing between the literary Adam and the historical Adam, death as a consequence of sin vs. death as a penalty for sin, divine eternity as timelessness or omnitemporality, different conceptions of the *imago Dei*, understanding the background of the Johannine prologue in Middle Platonism, understanding Egyptian monism as a background of Egyptian mythology, and so on. One may enthusiastically concur with Trent Dougherty's call for "analytic biblical theology," that is, "analytic thinkers becoming active participants in the field of biblical studies in ways that engage the mainstream from the inside rather than from the outside" (Trent Dougherty, "Advice for Analytic Theologians: Faith-Guided Scholarship," in *Christian Philosophy*, 182).

<sup>76</sup> See A. P. Martinich, "Introduction" in *A Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, ed. A. P. Martinich and David Sosa, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 4: analytic philosophy "is not a set of doctrines and not restricted in its subject matter. It is more like a method, a way of dealing with a problem, but in fact not one method but many that bear a family resemblance to each other."

Crisp suggests that analytic theology does inherit from analytic philosophy such substantive commitments as the presumption that there is some theological truth of the matter and that this truth can be ascertained and understood, and an instrumental use of reason (Crisp, "On Analytic Theology," in *Analytic Theology: New Essays*, 35). But I should think that such commitments are theological commitments derived from Scripture; an analytic philosopher, e.g., D. Z. Phillips, might deny them (D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry* [New York: Schocken, 1970]). Crisp et al. later state that almost all practitioners of analytic theology share substantive theological commitments, specifically, theological realism, the truth-aptness and truth-directedness of theological claims, and the importance of arguments reflecting the intellectual virtues prized by analytic theologians; but now they claim that analytic theologians share these substantive commitments, *not* because these commitments are part of the conceptual core of analytic theology, but rather because they are "part of the research culture of analytic theology" (Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, 18). Once again, the first two substantive commitments are more plausibly derived from Scripture, while the third is attributable to the adoption of the methods of analytic philosophy.

<sup>77</sup> See the nice characterization of analytic philosophizing by Max Baker-Hytch, "Analytic Theology and Analytic Philosophy of Religion: What's the Difference?" *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4 (2016): 348–349. I find Baker-Hytch's description much more perspicuous than Rea's, which seems to have been shaped by the need to provide foils for understanding contemporary theology's rejection of the analytic approach, as he acknowledges in Michael Rea, "Divine Attributes as a Topic in Analytic Theology," in *Essays in Analytic Theology*, 1:185.

Reason coherently; write clearly; say what you mean and mean what you say; try to express your ideas in terms that your audience will understand; try not to express your arguments and conclusions in overly ‘poetic’ language; understand the terms that you’re employing and rely on your understanding of those terms to draw out the implications of what you say and what you presuppose; and so on. Thus construed, it’s hard to imagine how anyone could sensibly object.<sup>78</sup>

Indeed; and the intellectual virtues of the analytic method of theorizing are ignored at our peril.

Systematic theology done well, then, will comprise philosophical theology. The only difference between the two seems to be the range of topics dealt with.<sup>79</sup> Systematic theology will be philosophical theology drawing upon Scripture to address the full theological curriculum (but, I shall claim, without taking on the burden of positive apologetics).

This understanding of systematic philosophical theology implies that this discipline is a theoretical pursuit, what German theologians call a *Wissenschaft*. It is a source of knowledge about reality, not just a way of fostering a feeling of dependence upon the Absolute or a way of exercising faith. It has propositional content which is objectively true or false. It is, moreover, governed by rigorous standards of argument and logical rules of inference, open to taking account of knowledge acquired from all fields. Thus, Crisp rightly characterizes Christian systematic theology as “that branch of theological science that attempts to give an organized, integrated, and systematic account of the various doctrines of the Christian faith.”<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Rea, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>79</sup> As a corrective to Abraham’s definition of analytic theology as “systematic theology attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy” (Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” 59), Crisp rightly points out that analytic theology may not always be systematic theology. For example, someone could do analytic natural theology, prescind from the resources of divine revelation (Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 17). One might have said the same of Christian evidences, which makes it clear that while analytic theology might include positive apologetics, systematic theology does not. Not all philosophical theology is systematic theology, but all systematic theology is philosophical theology of one kind or another. Crisp concludes, “Analytic theology as systematic theology is a way of doing systematic theology that utilizes the tools and methods of contemporary analytic philosophy for the purposes of constructive Christian theology, paying attention to the Christian tradition and development of doctrine” (32; cf. Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, 53). This characterization is redundant: once one has said that one is talking about a way of doing systematic theology, then the purposes and objects of attention do not need to be specified, for these are implicit in systematic theology. All systematic theology is constructive and attentive to tradition and doctrine. One need only specify that the philosophical component is analytic. Note that this characterization is incompatible with Crisp et al.’s characterization of analytic theology as an intellectual sub-culture (see following note).

<sup>80</sup> Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 3. As a *Wissenschaft* analytic theology is also clearly not, *pace* Crisp et al., an intellectual sub-culture with its own literature, jargon, social networks, and affiliated substantive commitments (Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, 3, 10–13). Doubtless, there is such a subculture, which has been “generated” by the research activities of analytic theologians, which “gives shape” to analytic theology, and which the analytic theologian is “formed by” and typically “participates” in (10, 11, 15).

Therefore, although systematic theology is ultimately done for the glory of God and is an expression of loving God with all our minds and will help us to know and worship God more profoundly, nevertheless as a theoretical discipline the proximate purpose of theology is to lay out in an organized, coherent way Christian truth claims.<sup>81</sup> Thus, it is a fundamental mistake to think that whereas philosophy aims at propositional knowledge of an object, theology aims at non-propositional knowledge of a person.<sup>82</sup> This distinction fails to reckon with the fact that theology, like philosophy, is a *Wissenschaft*; each of them seeks to provide theoretical knowledge of its object. Theology seeks to give us propositional knowledge about God and the world as related to him.<sup>83</sup> As Michael Rea has advised, we should be rightly cautious about any construal of theology which sees its proximate aim at providing personal knowledge of God. For that would make theology a rival to Scripture. “And that is a project which Christian philosophers and theologians ought to try to avoid. . . the right *theoretical* task for Christian philosophers and theologians to pursue is in fact one that

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But analytic theology itself is a *Wissenschaft*, not a subculture. That Crisp et al. are mistaken in thinking that such a subculture is constitutive of, rather than ancillary to, analytic theology is evident from the fact that earlier analytic philosophers like A. N. Prior, Nelson Pike, and Peter Geach were certainly doing analytic theology even though such a subculture did not yet exist. Even Crisp et al. admit that were a Barthian, Tillichian, or process theologian to explicate his views using the tools of analytic philosophy, then such a person would be doing analytic theology – even though he would not be part of the contemporary subculture of analytic theology (15).

<sup>81</sup> Cf. the classic Protestant distinction between the *finis theologiae principalis: glorificatio Dei* and the *finis theologiae intermedius: informatio hominem ad salutem*. The proximate purpose is to provide information, i.e., propositional truth.

<sup>82</sup> As claimed by Stump, who asserts:

“If we think of theology and philosophy in terms of the kind of epistemology each needs to best pursue its aims, then the distinction between knowledge *that* and knowledge of persons will highlight for us one of the important differences between the two disciplines, doctrinally considered. It is one thing to focus on gaining insight into a concrete particular who is a person and another thing to concentrate on seeking a body of knowledge characterized in terms of an abstract universal like wisdom” (Stump, “Athens and Jerusalem,” 53).

We see here how trying to distinguish between philosophy and theology by specifying essential properties of each discipline leads to idiosyncratic and controversial results.

<sup>83</sup> As emphasized by Andrew Torrance, “The Possibility of a Scientific Approach to Analytic Theology,” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 7 (2019): 178–198, who characterizes “scientific analytic theology” as an approach to analytic theology which seeks to give an account of God and all things in relation to him in a way that corresponds to or tracks the reality of the same (179). Unfortunately, Torrance expands the meaning of “scientific analytic theology” so that “being true to one’s faith commitments” is essential to a scientific approach to analytic theology (180). So when it comes to distinguishing between Christian philosophy of religion and Christian analytic theology, all of the five features listed by Torrance involve subjective attitudes and awarenesses on the theologian’s part (193–194). This attempt to differentiate the two disciplines fails because (i) the Christian philosopher may equally share such attitudes and awarenesses and (ii) such subjective states of consciousness are not inherent to the scientific nature of theology. It should be obvious that the same set of propositions if written by a non-Christian are no less scientific than if written by a Christian. But Torrance, in effect, endorses *theologia regeneratorum*, maintaining that it is not possible for a Muslim or atheist to write a scientific theology (188). Indeed, on Torrance’s view a Muslim who is true to his faith commitments and writes an Islamic theology which seeks to correspond to or track the reality of God and all things in relation to him has failed to write a scientific theology, just because his attempt fails. This is analogous to saying that Hoyle’s steady state theory, for example, was not a scientific theory because it failed to correspond to reality.

involves clarifying, systematizing, and model building – precisely the sort of project that analytic philosophers are engaged in.”<sup>84</sup> Systematic theology is, in short, a science, not a spiritual discipline.

If this is right, then Christian systematic theology is not the exclusive prerogative of a believer.<sup>85</sup> Because theology is a *Wissenschaft*, we should reject Pietism’s aim of a *theologia regenitorum*. Despite its *prima facie* appeal to believers, this notion is misconceived. That it is so becomes clear when we recall that systematic theology need not be Christian at all. An eminent Islamicist like Kenneth Cragg<sup>86</sup> could write, if he desired, a fully adequate Islamic systematic theology based on the Qur’an and the Hadith, despite his not being Muslim. By the same token, one need not be a regenerate Christian to write a Christian systematic theology, and systematic theologians who are at best merely nominally Christian come readily to mind. To think otherwise is to be guilty of a sort of genetic fallacy, attempting to invalidate a truth claim on the basis of how someone came to hold it. If Christian truth claims are true, then it simply does not matter who enunciates them. Now of course, we might claim that in order to write a *good* systematic theology of the Christian faith, one must be a regenerate Christian, for an unbeliever is unlikely to have the interest or stamina to

<sup>84</sup> Rea, “Introduction,” 19.

<sup>85</sup> One cannot therefore agree with Tillich that the theologian, in contrast to the philosopher, “is determined by his faith. Every theology presupposes that the theologian is *in the theological circle*. This contradicts the open, infinite, and changeable character of philosophical truth” (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:23 [my emphasis]). What does it mean to be in the theological circle? Tillich explains,

“The theologian. . . is not detached from his object but is involved in it. He looks at his object (which transcends the character of being an object) with passion, fear, and love. This is not the *erōs* of the philosopher or his passion for objective truth; it is the love which accepts saving, and therefore personal, truth. The basic attitude of the theologian is commitment to the content he expounds” (1:22–23).

Now even if it is true that the theologian is typically not detached from his object of study, but passionately committed to it, such subjective dispositions as Tillich describes are not germane to the propositional truth enunciated by the theologian. A theology written by a dispassionate person is not ipso facto not a systematic theology. Interestingly, Tillich seemed to recognize this fact: In contrast to the philosopher, who “wants to serve the universal *logos*” and “tries to turn away from his existential situation, including his ultimate concern,” the theologian:

“instead of turning away from his existential situation, including his ultimate concern, turns toward it. He turns toward it, not in order to make a confession of it, but in order to make clear the universal validity, the *logos* structure, of what concerns him ultimately. And he can do this only in an attitude of detachment from his existential situation and in obedience to the universal *logos*. This obliges him to be critical of every special expression of his ultimate concern. . . . He must take the risk of being driven beyond the boundary line of the theological circle. . . . The detachment required in honest theological work can destroy the necessary involvement of faith” (1:25–26 [my emphasis]).

Here Tillich seems to insist that the theologian, despite, and even at the risk of, his faith commitment, must assume a stance of dispassionate objectivity in doing theology. He remains in the theological circle, it seems, only in having a personal faith commitment to his ultimate concern (God) and in having among his sources the *Logos* “who became flesh” and is mediated through the church, its traditions, and its present reality (1:23–24). But in that case, as explained in the text, faith is not a requirement of doing systematic theology.

<sup>86</sup> On his life and works see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth\\_Cragg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_Cragg), archived at <https://perma.cc/CTD6-7JCP>.

engage in so arduous project and a merely nominal believer is apt to miss important truths. But that is a quite different claim than the claim that systematic theology as such can be written only by a regenerate believer.

### 2.3 Dogmatics

Our characterization of Christian systematic theology raises the question of how systematic theology relates to Christian dogmatics. What we have been calling systematic theology is known as dogmatic theology or dogmatics in German theology.<sup>87</sup> For Catholics dogmatic theology along with fundamental theology and moral theology make up what they call “systematic theology,” an overarching field for which we have no equivalent term in English. So it is simply not the case, as has been claimed, that dogmatics restricts itself to the doctrinal content of the creeds of the church. If one desires a label for that sort of theology, then “confessional theology” may serve to denote it.<sup>88</sup> Following German usage, then, we shall take “dogmatics” to be another name for systematic theology as we have characterized it. German Christian dogmatics does tend to be more heavily historical than Anglo-American systematic theology, tracing the history of dogma over the centuries. But that is a characteristic emphasis of German theological education in general and, hence, of German systematic theology (dogmatics). Since in doing systematic theology we stand on the shoulders of giants, a familiarity with the history of dogma will be invaluable for the systematic theologian. If we want a separate label for the study of the history of doctrine alone, then we may refer to this field as “historical theology.”<sup>89</sup>

<sup>87</sup> See, e.g., the popular handbook by Horst Georg Pöhlmann, *Abriss der Dogmatik*, 3rd rev. ed. (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1966), who defines dogmatics as the ecclesiastical science of God that summarizes the biblical message and reformulates it anew for our time (36). Pöhlmann emphasizes the unavoidability of philosophy for dogmatics (28–29).

<sup>88</sup> Sometimes such confessional theology is called “symbolics” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003], 1:54, 60).

<sup>89</sup> For fine examples, see Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, ed., *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971–1978); Friedrich Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studium der Dogmengeschichte*, 6th ed., ed. Kurt Aland (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1959); Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 3 vols., 4th ed. Sammlung theologischer Bücher 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1909). Note that Cunliffe-Jones believes that the ideal historian of Christian theology would be equally at home in the fields of history and philosophy (Cunliffe-Jones, “Introduction,” in *History of Christian Doctrine*, 17; cf. 18). For an instructive illustration of how historical theology can be muddled by ignoring philosophy see Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), who declines to “address the long-standing debates in analytic philosophy, philosophy of religion, or philosophical theology because these disciplines have nothing to offer my project. Rather, the debates seek different goals (e.g., analytic precision) and therefore ask different questions and use different tools to engage those questions” (3). Precisely his failure to provide clear definitions of terms like “essence,” “composition,” “attribute,” and “simplicity” subvert his project of tracing the roots of historical theology’s commitment to divine simplicity.

## 2.4 *Fundamental Theology and Apologetics*

It will be recalled that systematic theology, as we have characterized it, seeks not only to formulate, but also to defend coherent statements of Christian doctrine that take account of what we learn from all fields of study. It is this feature of systematic theology that especially requires and justifies its renewal for every generation.<sup>90</sup> This serves to raise the question of systematic theology's relationship to fundamental theology and apologetics.<sup>91</sup> In contrast to fundamental theology and apologetics, systematic theology is not tasked with the responsibility of positively proving the truth of its doctrinal assertions, even to the degree of being more probable than not. As Thomas Aquinas explained, there are truths which faith proposes and which reason is able to recover, that is, to prove, and truths which faith proposes but which are not recoverable, that is, provable, by

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<sup>90</sup> A salutary emphasis of Tillich: "A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation" (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:3). Systematic theology must therefore be "apologetic theology" in that it provides answers to the questions raised by each generation's existential situation. Tillich sought to find a respected place for the "discredited" discipline of apologetics by means of his "method of correlation" as a way of doing systematic theology. According to that method, the agenda for systematic theology is set by an analysis of the contemporary human situation, to which answers are in turn provided by the Christian message. "Apologetics, therefore, is an omnipresent element and not a special section of systematic theology. The 'method of correlation' applied in the present system gives pointed expression to the decisive character of the apologetic element in systematic theology" (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:30). For Tillich systematic theology thus comprised defensive apologetics, even if it did not extend so far as to offering a positive apologetic for the Christian message (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:16, 18).

Tillich's method of correlation commendably underscores the relevance of the Christian message to one's contemporary intellectual milieu; but he went too far in allowing it to set the agenda for systematic theology. He tried to justify that method by his rejection of the "supranaturalistic" method, which "takes the Christian message to be a sum of revealed truths which have fallen into the human situation like strange bodies from a strange world" (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:64–66). Although Tillich thought that on such a method, "No mediation to the human situation is possible," it is not at all clear why revealed truths could not be shown to correlate with the questions arising from our situation and thus provide answers to our deepest questions. Nor is there any reason to limit systematic theology to existential questions; the goal ought rather to be a synoptic worldview that takes account of what we learn from various disciplines regardless of their immediate relevance to existential concerns. For example, we shall want to know how the doctrine of divine eternity is to be correlated with what we learn of time from relativity theory.

<sup>91</sup> *N.B.* the silence of Crisp et al. concerning apologetics and fundamental theology in their effort to explicate the nature of analytic theology. Their closest approach is their discussion of so-called declarative theology of certain fourteenth century theologians like Peter Aureoli (Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, 20–33). According to Aureoli declarative theology helps to remove misunderstandings about the articles of faith in four ways: (1) by clarifying the terms utilized in the articles of faith, (2) by defeating objections to the articles of faith, (3) by providing analogies or examples illustrating the articles of faith, and (4) by giving probability arguments in support of the articles of faith. Crisp et al. characterize analytic theology as declarative theology. The first three tasks belong to systematic theology, as I understand it, but I should say that the fourth belongs to apologetics. So the implication of Crisp et al.'s view is that the analytic theologian is to be engaged in apologetics as well as systematics. Unfortunately, Crisp et al.'s discussion lacks this sort of differentiation. Indeed, it is not even clear that they think that the fourth task involves providing non-question-begging arguments for the articles of the faith, since the example they give involves a premise which would be accepted only by someone who already accepts the conclusion. So it is far from clear that they think that apologetics is a task of analytic theologians.

reason, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity (*Summa theologiae* Ia.1.1). While human reason, unaided by divine revelation, is able to prove God's existence, Thomas held that it cannot prove that God is triune. This truth is revealed to us in Scripture, whose authority is ratified by miracles and fulfilled prophecy.

Christian apologetics is that branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide rational justification for Christianity's truth claims. Apologetics may be employed either positively (offensively) to provide arguments and evidence in support of Christian truth claims or negatively (defensively) to defeat putative defeaters of Christian truth claims. Positive apologetics is subdivided into natural theology, which seeks to prove a generic theism common to all the great monotheistic religions, and Christian evidences, which seeks to prove that a specifically Christian theism is true. Defensive apologetics may be similarly subdivided, defeating would-be defeaters of theism, such as the problem of evil or challenges to the coherence of theism, or defeating alleged defeaters of specifically Christian theism, such as mythological views of Jesus.

Fundamental theology, as traditionally practiced in the Roman Catholic church, seeks to provide positive proof of its doctrinal claims, which are accordingly much more restricted than the doctrines of systematic theology. The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, finds no place in the syllabus of fundamental theology. The topics traditionally handled in fundamental theology include the revelation of God in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ; the conditions that open human beings to accepting in faith the self-communication of God; the testimony that puts us into contact with the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus and that makes faith in him a credible option; the transmission through inspired Scripture and tradition of the experience of God's self-communication; the founding and mission of the Christian church; and questions about theological knowledge and methods.<sup>92</sup> It is interesting that the doctrine of God's existence has not been traditionally considered a part of fundamental theology, but rather a part of natural theology and so part of the so-called preambles of faith. It is hard to understand the exclusion of God's existence from the topics of fundamental theology, and some contemporary fundamental theologians would add it to the syllabus.

Roman Catholic fundamental theology appears to be just another name for apologetics, restricted to a certain range of topics. Indeed, fundamental theology did originate in eighteenth century Protestant and Anglican

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<sup>92</sup> Gerald O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology: Toward a New Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15–16.

apologetics aimed at Enlightenment Deists, agnostics, and atheists.<sup>93</sup> Traditionally, Roman Catholic thought could be compared to a 3-story building. On the first (ground) floor, philosophy proves God's existence and attributes (but not triune nature); on the second floor, apologetics proves the factuality of divine revelation via the historical credibility of the Scriptures and tradition (as shown by miracles and fulfilled prophecies); and on the third floor dogmatics and moral theology systematize what has been communicated to us through divine revelation. Fundamental theology eventually came to occupy the second floor. The three traditional topics of fundamental theology were *demonstratio religiosa* (man has a religious openness and a philosophical glimpse of God); *demonstratio Christiana* (Christian revelation has occurred, the person of Christ is important, his resurrection was historical, and so on); and *demonstratio Catholica* (the Catholic tradition is the most authentic tradition, and revelation proceeds in the doctrinal tradition and clarification of the Catholic church). Fundamental theology thus seems to be apologetics in a Catholic mode.

Although Gerald O'Collins seeks to differentiate between fundamental theology and apologetics,<sup>94</sup> the three differences he identifies seem insufficient to demarcate these disciplines:

1. *A Christian apologist may deal simply with one question, such as the problem of evil, but fundamental theology must deal with many other questions as well, so that its agenda constitutes a whole theological discipline.* Response: Apologetics also deals with a wide range of topics, including those covered by fundamental theology, and so is also a theological discipline. Indeed, fundamental theology appears to handle but a restricted range of apologetical topics important for Catholics.
2. *Good apologetics characteristically has a sharply defined audience, but fundamental theology frequently has a wider range of readers in mind.* Response: This is not only manifestly false, since apologetics addresses believers and unbelievers alike, but readership hardly determines the character of a discipline. One might as well try to distinguish fundamental theology from apologetics by saying that the former, unlike the latter, is read mostly by Roman Catholics.
3. *While polemics belongs to the exercise of apologetics, the tone of fundamental theologians is or should be more expository and less polemically inclined to illustrate defects in opposing positions.* Response: The point here seems to be that while fundamental theology seeks both to provide

<sup>93</sup> I am indebted to Catholic professors Winfried Löffler and Armin Krainer for discussion.

<sup>94</sup> O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 4–5.

a positive case for Christian faith and to defeat objections to Christian faith, it does not aim to provide defeaters of opposing views. I am very skeptical, indeed, that fundamental theologians abstain from providing defeaters of opposing views, for example, naturalistic alternatives to Jesus' resurrection; but O'Collins' caveat "or should be" already suggests that we do not have here a truly distinguishing feature of fundamental theology. Thus fundamental theology is apologetics regarding a particular, but flexible, range of topics.

In contrast to apologetics and fundamental theology, systematic theology (dogmatics) should not be burdened with providing positive proof of its doctrinal claims. Insofar as systematic theology seeks to formulate and defend coherent statements of Christian doctrine, it overlaps with defensive (or negative) Christian apologetics, offering defeaters of challenges to, for example, the coherence of theism or the coherence of doctrines like the Trinity and incarnation. But it need not take the offensive by offering a positive case for the truth of its doctrines. This would collapse the distinction between systematic theology and apologetics and saddle the systematic theologian with a burden of proof that he does not bear.

We cannot therefore agree with Pannenberg in seeing "the truth of Christian doctrine as the theme of systematic theology."<sup>95</sup> Pannenberg believes that "Enlightenment criticism of both scripture and church doctrine has made it impossible ever since, in the presentation of Christian doctrine, freely to use them as authorities for divine revelation as medieval theology and the older Protestant theology did."<sup>96</sup> As a result of this loss of authority the weight of the question as to the truth of Christian doctrine "has shifted over entirely to dogmatics."<sup>97</sup> He insists that dogmatic theology has "to present, test, and if possible confirm" the truth claims of the Christian doctrinal tradition.<sup>98</sup> In sum, "Dogmatics as systematic theology proceeds by way of both assertion and hypothesis as it offers a model of the world, humanity, and history as they are grounded in God, a model which, if it is tenable, will 'prove' the reality of God and the truth of Christian

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<sup>95</sup> The title of chap. 1 of Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*, 1:1.

<sup>96</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:26. Pannenberg believes that the doctrine of verbal inspiration and biblical authority "could not be maintained in the face of new scientific, historical, and geographical evidence, and the idea of accommodation, which had been introduced to defend the thesis that every word of scripture is of divine origin, made it increasingly hollow" (1:46). Pannenberg seems to think that verbal inspiration implies a dictation theory of inspiration, according to which not "anything in scripture is of human origin," as opposed to a model of inspiration as appropriated discourse (1:32). We return to this subject in *De Scriptura sacra*.

<sup>97</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:8.

<sup>98</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:50.

doctrine, showing them to be consistently conceivable, and also confirming them, by the form of presentation.”<sup>99</sup>

Pannenberg’s claim here is surprising. One should have thought that in the absence of the traditional authorities of Scripture and church doctrine, the weight of the question as to the truth of Christian doctrine would have shifted over to fundamental theology and apologetics. But Pannenberg self-consciously assimilates dogmatics to fundamental theology and apologetics. He writes that traditionally:

the only question as regards the themes [of Protestant dogmatics] has been whether and how they derive from the source. Apologetics has had the task of raising the question of the truth of Christian doctrine. With few exceptions dogmatics has dealt only with the content.

Similarly, Roman Catholic theology has developed a distinction between fundamental theology and systematic theology. The former has to confirm the credibility of the Christian revelation, the latter to unfold its content. But is this division of duties justifiable? Does not an unfolding of the content of Christian teaching inevitably involve the question of its truth and true significance if the teaching is not to be a mere inventory of historical curiosities but is to be presented as divine revelation? It may surely be expected of dogmatics that it will also argue on behalf of the doctrinal content that it unfolds and confirm its truth.<sup>100</sup>

This attempt to assimilate systematic theology and apologetics does not take sufficient cognizance of the distinction between the defensive and offensive roles of apologetics. Since systematic theology has as its goal the formulation and defense of a logically coherent worldview that takes into account information acquired from all disciplines, it will, indeed, be concerned with the truth of the doctrinal content it delivers and will involve a good deal of argumentation, as it attempts to defeat would-be defeaters of Christian doctrines. But that defensive role does not imply that systematic theology should offer a positive apologetic for the truth of Christian doctrines. To illustrate, Christian philosophers have attempted to explicate and defend various models of the incarnation which affirm the true deity and true humanity of Christ in order to show the coherence of that doctrine,<sup>101</sup> but they would not presume to say that any of their models

<sup>99</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:60.

<sup>100</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:48.

<sup>101</sup> For example, Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Andrew Ter Ern Loke, *A Kryptic Model of the Incarnation*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2014). As Crisp et al. explain, “models are nearly always used in the analytic theological literature for some narrow purpose, such as understanding how it is not a contradiction to suppose that the simple God can be both three and one or that Christ can be both

is true. It is sufficient to show that the model is plausible, that there are no good defeaters lodged against it. Pannenberg's call to provide positive confirmation of Christian doctrinal claims, however it may press upon the Christian apologist or fundamental theologian, is not an obligation for the systematic theologian.<sup>102</sup>

Pannenberg thinks that "the collapse of the older Protestant scripture principle as formulated in the doctrine of inspiration. . . invalidated the attempt to use the idea of verbal inspiration to establish the divine truth of scripture in all its parts as a presupposition."<sup>103</sup> But, he adds, "this collapse did not make untenable the basing of Christian theology on scripture as the norm of its content."<sup>104</sup> It might appear at first blush that Pannenberg is, in effect, attacking the method of presuppositionalism in apologetics.<sup>105</sup> For he speaks of the attempt to "establish" or "decide about the truth" of Scripture on the basis of verbal inspiration.<sup>106</sup> But presuppositionalism would seem to be a red herring. Verbal inspiration is the grounds of Scripture's *being* an authoritative divine revelation, but it need not be thought to be the means by which we *show* that Scripture is an authoritative divine revelation. So, for example, Charles Hodge clearly distinguished between the question *What does the Bible teach as to the nature and effects of the influence under which it is written?* and the question *Is the Bible what it claims to be?*<sup>107</sup> Far too often these questions are conflated. Verbal inspiration is relevant for answering the first question, not the second.

So how might Pannenberg's claim that the collapse of the traditional authorities requires the dogmatician to build a positive case for Christianity be viewed in light of contemporary developments in religious epistemology? It seems that Pannenberg rejects taking Scripture as a basic source

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finite and infinite" (Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, 18). "Such modeling in analytic theology enables the theologian to provide new ways of thinking about theological sources and doctrines that are not necessarily true all things considered, but are illuminating and helpful ways of conceiving particular doctrines – as well as (hopefully) being possibly true, at least in significant respects" (57–58).

<sup>102</sup> It may be doubted how seriously Pannenberg actually takes this charge, for he holds that Christianity's claim to reveal the one true God "is open to future verification in history, which is as yet incomplete, and which is still exposed, therefore, to the question of its truth. . . . Since we have to make an attempt at this so long as there is Christian teaching, the theological testing and verification of the truth claims of Christian revelation will take place in the form of a systematic reconstruction of Christian doctrine, beginning with the understanding of God" (Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:257). Such a reconstruction is a far cry from probabilistic confirmation of the Christian faith.

<sup>103</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:46.

<sup>104</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:46.

<sup>105</sup> For an example of presuppositionalism in systematic theology see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 1, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Preliminary Considerations* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976), chap.13 "The Method and Criteria of Theology (1): Revelation: The Basic Epistemological Axiom." Presuppositionalists like Henry tend to collapse any distinction between systematic theology and apologetics, since Scripture attests authoritatively to its own truth.

<sup>106</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:234.

<sup>107</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1940) 1:153–154.

of knowledge in light of modern historical-critical studies, which have exposed its many errors. We may, however, with Baker-Hytch, distinguish between two ways in which a theologian might appeal to Scripture and tradition, namely: (i) using a claim asserted by Scripture or ecclesial tradition as a foundational premise in an argument, and (ii) citing claims made by Scripture or ecclesial tradition in order to demonstrate what is entailed by Christian theism.<sup>108</sup> What Pannenberg rejects is (i), while affirming (ii). The dogmatician might still appeal to Scripture as the source of the normative content of Christian doctrine, if not as a means of guaranteeing its truth.

Concerning (i), Pannenberg's rejection on historical-critical grounds of taking Scripture as a basic source of knowledge is rather odd, since many of the sources of knowledge taken as basic by contemporary epistemologists, such as memory, testimony, and even sense perception, are similarly error-prone and yet not, for all that, no longer basic. Why could Scripture not contain kernels of theological truth that are revelatory within the husks of antique science or history, which are incidental to its theological content? Pannenberg rejects any attempt to identify divine revelation with the theological content of Scripture, a move he calls "accommodation." Pannenberg gives no reason for rejecting accommodation, a hermeneutical device that seems not at all implausible in view of Scripture's situatedness in the ancient world and its intention to teach, not ancient cosmology or biology, but various theological truths about Yahweh. So it is not clear that Scripture need be inerrant in all that it states in order to be a basic source of knowledge of God. We shall return to this subject when discussing the doctrine of verbal inspiration.

But let that pass for now. Even if Scripture is not taken to be a basic source of theological knowledge, Pannenberg recognizes that dogmaticians, in line with (ii) above, may appeal to Scripture as a source of information concerning Christian doctrine without presupposing its truth. Scripture was traditionally understood to be the *norma normans* of Christian doctrine.<sup>109</sup> When asked how we know that the doctrinal content of Christianity is true, the dogmatician might appeal to the witness of the Holy Spirit or to evidence on its behalf of its authority. For example, Aquinas does not simply presuppose the truth of Scripture; rather Scripture's authority is made evident by the signs of credibility attending it, namely, miracles and prophecy. The dogmatician is properly concerned with establishing the doctrinal content of the Christian faith, not with establishing

<sup>108</sup> Baker-Hytch, "Analytic Theology and Analytic Philosophy of Religion," 351.

<sup>109</sup> For Protestant scholasticism Scripture is the *norma normans* determining the doctrinal content of the Christian faith, while church confessions are the *norma normata* determined by Scripture.

the truth of its doctrinal content. Just as a Christian Islamicist might lay out the doctrinal content of Islam on the basis of the teaching of the Qur'an and the Hadith without any assumption as to its truth, so the dogmatician may expound the doctrinal content of the Christian faith and even defend its inner coherence without any presupposition of its truth.

Pannenberg is rightly exercised that in our secular age Christian faith be an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women. But the task of presenting a positive case in confirmation of Christian truth claims is better left to the Christian apologist or fundamental theologian. It is enough for the Christian systematician to formulate and defend against objections a comprehensive and coherent formulation of a Christian worldview.

## 2.5 *Philosophy of Religion*

We come now to the important question of the relation of systematic theology to philosophy of religion. As it appears on the contemporary scene, there are actually two rather different disciplines going under the name of "philosophy of religion." What I have described thus far is a sub-discipline of philosophy pursued by professional philosophers, who would typically participate in a professional society like the American Philosophical Association. But philosophy of religion is also a sub-discipline of religious studies, where it is typically carried out by professors of religion or theology who are active professionally in societies like the American Academy of Religion. These two approaches to philosophy of religion have a very different texture.<sup>110</sup> Loosely speaking, we may say that the former is concerned with philosophizing about problems raised by religious truth claims, whereas the latter tends to philosophize about the phenomenon of religion itself. The latter therefore resembles more closely than the former the discipline of comparative religion; and when its advocates do reflect on a problem of philosophical significance, they often lack the conceptual tools furnished by training in analytic philosophy. The contemporary resurgence of interest in philosophy of religion is due almost entirely to the revolution that has taken place among professional analytic philosophers, whose work the practitioners of religious studies are finding increasingly difficult to ignore.

Our interest is entirely in philosophy of religion as a sub-discipline of philosophy. We are therefore spared the task of defining "religion," since

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<sup>110</sup> See William J. Wainwright, who probably more than any other has had a foot in both camps (William J. Wainwright, ed., *God, Philosophy and Academic Culture: A Discussion between Scholars in the AAR and the APA* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996]). Here, indeed, we have the sort of intellectual sub-cultures spoken of by Crisp et al.

we are not interested in philosophizing about religion.<sup>111</sup> Our task is made all the easier, moreover, by that fact that we are interested, not in philosophy of religion in general, but in the philosophy of the *Christian* religion, with which most of us are familiar.<sup>112</sup> As a sub-discipline of philosophy, philosophy of religion has been aptly compared to other philosophical sub-disciplines like philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of art, and so on. Such sub-disciplines explore philosophical questions that arise out of their respective fields. For example, in philosophy of science one of the major questions, constituting a sub-discipline of its own, is the nature of space and time: Is time tensed or tenseless? Is temporal becoming objective, or is reality a static 4-dimensional spacetime manifold? In philosophy of mathematics, the burning question concerns ontology: Do mathematical objects like numbers and sets exist as mind-independent objects? If so, how is mathematical knowledge possible? Similarly, Christian theology bristles with philosophical questions in virtually every area it touches, paramountly the doctrine of God.<sup>113</sup> By philosophy

<sup>111</sup> As one might anticipate, the phenomenon of religion is so amorphous as to make difficult any definition of “religion” which is immune to counter-examples. Although whole books are available on this question, David Shatz conveniently provides a handful of plausible definitions of “religion” in his *Philosophy and Faith: A Philosophy of Religion Reader* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), xv–xvi. Michael Peterson et al. provide the following explication of “religion,” which they claim fits every cultural phenomenon that we call a religion: “Religion is constituted by a set of beliefs, actions, and emotions, both personal and corporate, organized around the concept of an Ultimate Reality” (Michael Peterson et al., *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 4). Even if we cannot specify necessary and sufficient conditions of religion, this is not of great moment, as Winfried Löffler points out, since neither can we identify such conditions for other fields such as psychology, sociology, and other cultural sciences. What we can do is identify a number of family resemblances among undisputed examples of religions that serve to make clear what we are talking about (Winfried Löffler, *Einführung in die Religionsphilosophie*, Einführungen Philosophie [Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006], 15–16; cf. 43). Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 21, similarly says that religions include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism and those traditions that resemble one or more of them.

<sup>112</sup> Some have lamented the lack of religious diversity in philosophy of religion, which is dominated by Christian philosophers (Moti Mizrahi, “If Analytic Philosophy of Religion Is Sick, Can It Be Cured?” *Religious Studies* 56 [2020]: 558–577). Paradoxically, we can praise God and rejoice that most philosophers of religion are Christian, even if the field could benefit by greater participation by adherents of non-Christian religions. Although exploration of non-Christian philosophy of religion by Christian philosophers can be beneficial for Christian philosophy, the best way to increase the diversity of the field is by welcoming non-Christian philosophers into the field.

<sup>113</sup> The eminent Oxonian philosopher Anthony Kenny has said:

“If there is no God, then God is incalculably the greatest single creation of the human imagination. No other creation of the imagination has been so fertile of ideas, so great an inspiration to philosophy, to literature, to painting, sculpture, architecture, and drama. Set beside the idea of God, the most original inventions of mathematicians and the most unforgettable characters in drama are minor products of the imagination: Hamlet and the square root of minus one pale into insignificance by comparison” (Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Philosophy* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1983], 59).

I am indebted to Charles Taliaferro for this reference. Kenny, who was my external examiner at Birmingham, once remarked to me that he found philosophy of religion to be the most interesting field of philosophy because, as the spokes of a wheel touch every part of the wheel, so philosophy of religion touches every other area of philosophy.

of the Christian religion, then, one means philosophical reflection on the truth claims of Christian theology.

Apart from the addition of apologetics, the philosophy of the Christian religion is therefore coextensive with Christian systematic theology. Their subject matter is largely the same. This raises the important question whether they are to be differentiated, not with respect to the subjects they treat, but on the basis of their method.

### 2.5.1 The Attempt to Differentiate Philosophy from Theology

During the previous generation philosophy of religion was typically thought to be distinct from theology. The principal difference between the two fields lay in their basic sources. Philosophy of religion, as a field of philosophy, was thought to be a secular discipline which excluded non-natural basic sources of knowledge like divine revelation. By contrast theology, precisely because it is theology, includes divine revelation among its basic sources.

For Tillich, philosophy and theology, though they ask the same questions, are hermetically sealed disciplines which can neither conflict nor intersect. He identifies three ways in which they diverge. First, philosophy, in contrast to theology, is to be pursued with detachment and objectivity. We have already seen how Tillich thinks that the theologian stands inside the theological circle, passionately committed to the object of his study. By contrast:

The philosopher tries to maintain a detached objectivity toward being and its structures. . . . His passion is the passion for a truth which is open to general approach, subject to general criticism, changeable in accordance with every new insight, open and communicable. In all these respects he feels no different from the scientist, historian, psychologist, etc. He collaborates with them. . . . This relation to the sciences (in the broad sense of *Wissenschaften*) strengthens the detached, objective attitude of the philosopher.<sup>114</sup>

The second way in which the fields diverge concerns their sources. We have seen that for Tillich the theologian's source of knowledge is not the universal *logos* common to all men but the incarnate Logos mediated by the church. In contrast to the theologian, the philosopher pursues his study by means of the universal *logos*, that is, "pure reason."<sup>115</sup> Thirdly, philosophy and theology diverge in their content, even when they address the same

<sup>114</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:22.

<sup>115</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:23.

object. For example, the philosopher deals with causality as it appears in physics or psychology; he analyzes time as it is understood biologically or historically; he discusses space both on the astronomical as well as the microscopic level. He describes the epistemological subject and the relation of person and community.

The theologian, on the other hand, relates the same categories and concepts to the quest for a 'new being.' His assertions have a soteriological character. He discusses causality in relation to a *prima causa*, the ground of the whole series of causes and effects; he deals with time in relation to eternity, with space in relation to man's existential homelessness. He speaks of the self-estrangement of the subject, about the spiritual center of personal life, and about community as a possible embodiment of the 'New Being.'<sup>116</sup>

Because these fields are so diverse, there can be neither conflict nor synthesis between them. If the theologian and philosopher come into conflict, it is only because the theologian has stepped outside the theological circle and become a philosopher or the philosopher has stepped into that circle and become a theologian. So, Tillich writes,

The theologian has no right whatsoever to argue for a philosophical opinion in the name of his ultimate concern or on the basis of the theological circle. He is obliged to argue for a philosophical decision in the name of the universal *logos* and from the place which is no place: pure reason. It is a disgrace for the theologian and intolerable for the philosopher if in a philosophical discussion the theologian suddenly claims an authority other than pure reason. Conflicts on the philosophical level are conflicts between two philosophers, one of whom happens to be a theologian, but there are not conflicts between theology and philosophy.<sup>117</sup>

For the same reason, there can be no synthesis of philosophy and theology. Tillich firmly repudiates "the dream of a 'Christian philosophy.'"<sup>118</sup> The only sense in which a philosophy can be said to be Christian is to have its roots in Western Christian history; but "In this sense all modern philosophy is Christian, even if it is humanistic, atheistic, and intentionally anti-Christian."<sup>119</sup> The idea of a Christian philosophy in the sense of

<sup>116</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:24.

<sup>117</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:26.

<sup>118</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:27.

<sup>119</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:27.

“a philosophy which is intentionally Christian” is self-contradictory and must be rejected.<sup>120</sup>

In the older textbooks of philosophy of religion one finds the same distinction drawn between philosophy of religion and theology of various sorts on the basis of philosophy’s independence of theology. For example, John MacQuarrie thinks that philosophy of religion studies religion from a “disinterested” point of view, whereas philosophical theology belongs “within the theological enterprise.”<sup>121</sup> Frederick Ferré, appealing explicitly to Tillich, says that philosophy of religion is distinct from philosophical theology because the latter, like biblical theology and systematic theology, is “a species contained within the theological genus.”<sup>122</sup> What the philosophical genus looks like is evident from Ferré’s unflattering comparison of philosophy of religion to apologetics:

To the extent. . . that apologetics is motivated by a fixed interest in defending certain established positions against all attacks, it is not qualified to be considered ‘philosophy’ at all. If the ruling motive of apologetics is not the spirit of free inquiry, the commitment to unhindered argument wherever it may lead, it lacks the dominant concern of philosophy. Apologetics to that extent is fundamentally the expression of a religious interest rather than a philosophical one. Its resemblance to philosophy is in appearance only; it is not a metareligious study so much as a defensive weapon of religion.<sup>123</sup>

On this interpretation, as on Tillich’s, philosophy of religion must be a sort of free thought, proceeding from no standpoint, committed to no prior positions, having no religious interest. In 1967 William Alston, who would later make such tremendous contributions to Christian philosophy, wrote, “The philosophy of religion. . . is distinguished from theology by the fact that it takes nothing for granted, at least nothing religious; in the course of its examination it takes the liberty of calling anything into question. Theology, in a narrow sense of that term, sets out to articulate the beliefs of

<sup>120</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:28.

<sup>121</sup> John MacQuarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1977), 39. And even within the theological enterprise, MacQuarrie separates philosophical theology, which excludes non-natural sources of knowledge, from “symbolic” (i.e., confessional) theology and applied theology. Even Geddes MacGregor, who so emphasized the personal importance of religious belief for the religious philosopher, insisted that “the religious philosopher is strikingly distinguished from the theologian” in that “the religious philosopher as such ought not to be a theologian *in his working hours*. . . . As a theologian he is committed to the acceptance of certain postulates which may even be set forth in propositional form. As a religious philosopher he must practice a rigorous intellectual self-denial that precludes any procedure of that kind” (Geddes MacGregor, *Introduction to Religious Philosophy* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959], 315–316).

<sup>122</sup> Ferré, *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion*, 10.

<sup>123</sup> Ferré, *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion*, 10.

a given religion and to put them into systematic order, without ever raising the ultimate question of their truth.”<sup>124</sup> According to this surprising characterization, philosophy never proceeds from a religious standpoint, and theology never explores the basis of its own truth claims. Similarly, William Rowe states, “Philosophy of religion, unlike theology, is not primarily a discipline *within* religion, but a discipline which studies religion from a vantage point beyond.”<sup>125</sup> Again, this characterization implies that philosophy of religion must proceed from a non-religious standpoint. Rowe acknowledges the awkward fact that Anselm and Aquinas can be viewed as philosophizing about certain issues in religion, but despite these overlaps, he thinks, the philosophy of religion as a discipline should not be identified with theology. One is astonished to find that as recently as 2021, in a work dedicated to exploring the relationship between analytic theology and related disciplines, the author distinguishes theology from philosophy by saying, “Roughly, theology. . . begins from revelation; the theologian accepts as true certain premises drawn from scripture and tradition and then reasons about their implications. Philosophy, by contrast, begins from generally available premises that are in principle credible to anyone reasoning properly.”<sup>126</sup>

## 2.5.2 The Collapse of Classical Foundationalism

As Eleonore Stump notes, this way of distinguishing the disciplines of philosophy and theology is an Enlightenment view characteristic of modernism. In the aftermath of the collapse of classical foundationalism, she says, “it is hard to know who would now whole-heartedly endorse this way of

<sup>124</sup> Alston, “Philosophy of Religion, Problems of.”

<sup>125</sup> William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1978), 1–2. Cf. John Hick’s less radical characterization: “Philosophy of religion . . . *need not* be undertaken from a religious standpoint at all. Philosophy of religion is accordingly not a branch of theology. . . , but a branch of philosophy” (John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., Foundations of Philosophy Series [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973], 1–2 [my emphasis]). Hick’s characterization leaves open the possibility that philosophy of religion may be undertaken from a religious standpoint. Hick assumes, wrongly I think, that theology must be undertaken from a religious standpoint. Examples of more recent philosophers of religion holding to an essentially Tillichian view include Long, *Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion*, 3; and Löffler, *Einführung in die Religionsphilosophie*, 34–35.

<sup>126</sup> Wood, *Analytic Theology*, 48. Wood thinks that analytic philosophy of religion is limited to the study of “bare theism,” viz., the existence and nature of God, whereas philosophical theology investigates “the theological claims made by a specific religious tradition” (7). Such a characterization is simply out of touch with the reality of these disciplines. Wood seems to realize that this distinction is artificial rather than truly descriptive, for he admits that “the line between philosophy of religion and philosophical theology has always been fuzzy. . . much analytic philosophy of religion is implicitly the philosophy of Christianity despite explicitly bearing the moniker ‘philosophy of religion’” (7, 9). As for analytic theology, Wood can discern “no sharp distinction between ‘analytic theology’ and ‘analytic philosophical theology’” (8). In fairness, it should be said that Wood’s burden is not to delineate these disciplines but rather to build bridges between analytic theology on the one hand and theology and religious studies on the other.

identifying philosophy and theology. On the contrary, we have learned to be skeptical of the whole Enlightenment view that seemed to support it.”<sup>127</sup> Philosophers working in meta-epistemology in the late twentieth century came to conclude, not only that the implicit epistemology of most philosophers during the modern period has been classical foundationalism, but, more importantly, that “classical foundationalism is untenable as a theory either of knowledge or of rational (responsible) belief.”<sup>128</sup>

Analytic philosophers have pressed two main objections against classical foundationalism, closely akin to those that dethroned Verificationism. First, the theory is self-referentially incoherent. The very principle that our basic sources of knowledge are restricted to those that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses is not itself either self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. Therefore, if the principle is to be rationally believed, it must be inferable from beliefs that do meet these conditions. But it is not thus inferable and therefore cannot be rationally believed. Second, the theory would render a wide range of beliefs, such as perceptual beliefs, which we all rationally embrace, irrational, which is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the theory.<sup>129</sup>

### 2.5.3 Naturalized Epistemology

The collapse of classical foundationalism did not, however, automatically bring with it an openness of philosophers to non-natural basic sources of knowledge. It gave way instead to what W. V. O. Quine called “naturalized epistemology” or “naturalism” for short.<sup>130</sup> According to naturalism, natural science is the sole arbiter of truth and sole guide to reality. Naturalism in this sense is just “the recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described.”<sup>131</sup> In contrast to classical foundationalism, Quine’s naturalized epistemology shunned

<sup>127</sup> Stump, “Athens and Jerusalem,” 48. But see Crisp et al.’s discussion of the prominent American theologian Robert Jenson, who regards philosophy as secularized theology, a rival to theology (Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, 50). Indeed, it seems to me that the notion that analytic philosophy of religion is an inherently secular discipline remains commonplace among theologians, especially those anxious to carve out an exclusive domain for themselves. All too often generic, rather than Christian, philosophy of religion is played off against Christian theology. For example, Baker-Hytch asserts, “To treat Christian scripture and tradition as epistemologically foundational is certainly to part ways with the methodology of analytic philosophy of religion” (Baker-Hytch, “Analytic Theology and Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” 356; cf. Wood, *Analytic Theology*, 48, who endorses Baker-Hytch’s distinction; Andrew Chignell, “As Kant Has Shown. . . : Analytic Theology and the Critical Philosophy,” in *Analytic Theology*, ed. Crisp and Rea, 119).

<sup>128</sup> Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible,” 160.

<sup>129</sup> Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible,” 160.

<sup>130</sup> W. V. Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, ed. W. V. Quine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 69–90.

<sup>131</sup> W. V. Quine, “Things and Their Place in Theories,” in *Theories and Things*, ed. W. V. Quine (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 21.

what he called “first philosophy,” any attempt to justify the deliverances of the sciences.<sup>132</sup> There should be no attempt to ground the natural sciences; rather this is where we begin our philosophizing: Naturalism

sees natural science as an inquiry into reality, fallible and corrigible but not answerable to any supra-scientific tribunal, and not in need of any justification beyond observation and the hypothetico-deductive method. . . .

The naturalistic philosopher begins his reasoning within the inherited world theory as a going concern. He tentatively believes all of it, but believes also that some unidentified portions are wrong. He tries to improve, clarify, and understand the system from within. He is the busy sailor adrift on Neurath’s boat.<sup>133</sup>

The salient point here is that the marooned philosopher has no other resources than the deliverances of the natural sciences at his disposal. So although Quine abandoned classical foundationalism in taking natural science to be a basic source of knowledge, he does not include among our basic sources of knowledge non-natural or even non-scientific sources.

Now Quine’s was a generous scientism which was not restricted to the deliverances of the hard sciences like physics and chemistry. He explains, “In science itself I certainly want to include the farthest flights of physics and cosmology, as well as experimental psychology, history, and the social sciences.”<sup>134</sup> Nonetheless, his naturalism does have some bite, as is illustrated by Quine’s attitude toward tense and temporal becoming. Although he did not write on the subject at any length, Quine’s passing remarks indicate that despite our ineluctable experience of the reality of tense and temporal becoming, Quine dutifully follows what he takes to be the verdict of the natural sciences that reality is tenseless and that temporal becoming is a subjective illusion of human consciousness. Naturalized epistemology, finding no place for tensed time in natural science, waves aside the deliverances of our experience of the presentness of experience and of temporal becoming. Similarly, the reality of the self, apprehended in first-person experience, is denied as a result of Quine’s naturalism.

The relevant aspect of naturalized epistemology for theistic beliefs, then, is its restriction of our basic sources of knowledge to the sciences.

<sup>132</sup> In his “Five Milestones of Empiricism,” Quine identified naturalism as the “abandonment of the goal of a first philosophy prior to natural science” (W. V. Quine, “Five Milestones of Empiricism,” in *Theories and Things*, ed. Quine, 67).

<sup>133</sup> Quine, “Five Milestones of Empiricism,” 72. Otto Neurath was a sometime member of the Vienna Circle who frequently employed the image of reconstructing a boat while at sea in order to express his anti-foundationalist view of knowledge. See Nancy Cartwright et al., *Otto Neurath: Philosophy between Science and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89–166.

<sup>134</sup> W. V. Quine, “Naturalism; or, Living within One’s Means,” *Dialectica* 49 (1995): 252.

Unlike Verificationism, which sought to eliminate metaphysics, Quine's naturalized epistemology domesticates it by seeing metaphysics as continuous with the natural sciences. Only those metaphysical entities, for example, mathematical objects, may be posited which are required by the truth of our best scientific theories. Quine claimed to be, at least in principle, quite open to the existence of supernatural realities: "If I saw indirect explanatory benefit in positing sensibilia, possibilia, spirits, a Creator, I would joyfully accord them scientific status too, on a par with such avowedly scientific posits as quarks and black holes."<sup>135</sup> If the sciences provide good grounds for thinking that supernatural entities exist, then we should accept their reality, since there is no other independent, accepted source of knowledge about reality. But absent such evidence theistic beliefs would be irrational.

Quine's naturalism thus involves, as Michael Rea explains, a methodological disposition to restrict one's basic sources of knowledge to the deliverances of science, broadly construed. The crucial identifying dispositions of Quine's naturalism, he says, are "a high regard for science and scientific method, a disposition to employ scientific methods and results in all domains of inquiry as much as possible to the exclusion of a priori speculative methods, [and] opposition to theories, particularly religious ones, that are untestable and do not play any significant role in filling out interstices of scientific theory."<sup>136</sup>

No orthodox Christian can embrace Quine's naturalized epistemology, since so doing would exclude divine revelation as a basic source of knowledge about reality. Christian theists, in contrast to naturalists, hold that theology is itself a *Wissenschaft*, that is to say, a body of knowledge. Given the widespread and lingering influence of Quine's naturalized epistemology,<sup>137</sup>

<sup>135</sup> Quine, "Naturalism," 252.

<sup>136</sup> Michael C. Rea, *World without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 49.

<sup>137</sup> Of naturalism, Rea observes, "It is not just fashionable nowadays; it enjoys the lofty status of academic orthodoxy" (Rea, *World without Design*, 1). John Burgess and Gideon Rosen, reflecting on the present state of Anglophone philosophy, state that there is "near consensus" on the presupposition of naturalized epistemology (John P. Burgess and Gideon Rosen, *A Subject with No Object* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997], 64–65). Thomas Hofweber agrees: "Today almost all of ontology, the discipline, is within the paradigm that started with Quine's classic essay 'On What There Is'. . . we look to science to tell us what there is" (Thomas Hofweber, "Ontology and Objectivity," [PhD diss., Stanford University, 1999], 3). Concerning Quine's legacy Roger Gibson surmises, "Only time can tell, but I suggest that his revival of naturalism (the 'naturalistic turn') will survive well into the new century. Philosophy is continuous with science; there is no first philosophy, no external vantage point" (Roger F. Gibson, Jr., "Willard Van Orman Quine," in *The Cambridge Companion to Quine*, ed. Roger F. Gibson, Jr. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 14). A caveat is in order, however: the form of "naturalism" dominant in contemporary philosophy of mathematics is not the hardline Quinean restrictivism, but rather a disposition to place special weight on the views and practices of mathematicians themselves, as the practitioners of the discipline, rather than on the views of outsiders, including philosophers. On naturalism in this sense, see Penelope Maddy, *Naturalism in Mathematics*

especially evident in such sub-disciplines as philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, and philosophy of mind, the Christian theist may find himself somewhat out of step with a good deal of contemporary philosophy. His theological arguments or objections will be treated dismissively as emanating from what has been called an “alienated epistemology.”<sup>138</sup> But as Alvin Plantinga has emphasized,<sup>139</sup> the Christian philosopher does not take his philosophical marching orders from current philosophy, and integrity as Christian thinkers demands that we seek to formulate a worldview that integrates theological knowledge with other basic sources of knowledge such as are found in the natural sciences. The fact that naturalists reject sources of knowledge other than the sciences should not trouble us in our philosophizing.

Now, of course, as Plantinga acknowledges, if there were some reason to think that our basic sources of knowledge really are restricted to the natural sciences alone, then that would be a genuine matter for concern that would need to be addressed. But there is no such reason. Even if we allow that science needs no external justification for its being a basic source of knowledge, there is nothing in science itself that warrants the sweeping claim that there are no extra-scientific basic sources of such knowledge as moral, aesthetic, religious, and metaphysical knowledge.<sup>140</sup> But then naturalism’s restrictive epistemological stance is either

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(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pt. 3: “Naturalism.” Similarly, Alvin Plantinga avers that his account of warrant in terms of the proper functioning of our cognitive faculties is naturalistic, leading him to tease, “striking the naturalistic pose is all the rage these days, and it’s a great pleasure to be able to join the fun” (Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], 46).

<sup>138</sup> For this appellation, see Burgess and Rosen, *Subject with No Object*, 205. Rosen elsewhere distinguishes what he calls permissive naturalism from restrictive naturalism. The permissive naturalist holds that fulfillment of the internal norms of a scientific discipline is sufficient to make belief in certain entities rational; whereas the restrictive naturalist maintains that it is irrational not to believe in the entities so recommended (Gideon Rosen, “Nominalism, Naturalism, Epistemic Relativism,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 15 [2001]: 80–82). Rosen raises a number of difficult questions for the restrictive naturalist; but even his so-called permissive naturalism restricts our basic sources of knowledge to the sciences. As Burgess and Rosen state, “The naturalists’ commitment is at most to the comparatively modest proposition that when science speaks with a firm and unified voice, the philosopher is either obliged to accept its conclusions or to offer what are recognizably scientific reasons for resisting them” (Burgess and Rosen, *Subject with No Object*, 65). There can be no extra-scientific basic source of knowledge that might lead us to doubt that scientific practice delivers to us the whole truth about reality. The Christian theist’s theological grounds for not taking the fulfillment of the internal norms of a scientific discipline to be the final word in ontology will therefore be treated dismissively.

<sup>139</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1984): 253–271. Plantinga delivered two admonitions: “First, Christian philosophers and Christian intellectuals generally must display more autonomy – more independence of the rest of the philosophical world. Second, Christian philosophers must display more integrity – integrity in the sense of integral wholeness, or oneness, or unity, being all of one piece” (254). Cf. Plantinga’s own integrative thinking concerning a theistic perspective on the existence of mathematical objects in *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 284–291.

<sup>140</sup> For a critique see Paul Moser and David Yandell, “Farewell to Philosophical Naturalism,” in *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis*, ed. Wm. L. Craig and J. P. Moreland (London: Routledge, 2000), 3–23.

justified extra-scientifically, which makes naturalism self-defeating, or else simply unjustified.

Rea argues that naturalism must be regarded as unjustified.<sup>141</sup> That is to say, naturalism is most plausibly taken to be a set of methodological dispositions on the part of the inquirer which treats only the deliverances of the natural sciences as basic sources of evidence. As a set of methodological dispositions (or a research program), naturalism is not a philosophical thesis at all and is therefore neither true nor false. Since it makes no claims, it requires no justification. But then neither can it assert its superiority to some other inquirer's non-naturalistic set of methodological dispositions which treats as basic sources of evidence not only the deliverances of science but, for example, rational intuition or divine revelation. Rea observes,

What unifies naturalists is just a shared set of methodological dispositions. Furthermore, these dispositions preclude naturalists from justifiably believing that their research program is one that *ought* to be shared by others, or that it is the only one that issues in justified belief. For to think such things is to suppose in part that the epistemic status of scientific reasoning is open for philosophical debate. But the project of using philosophy to justify science is a project that naturalists reject.<sup>142</sup>

The naturalist may prefer his research program, but he has no grounds for thinking that those who reject his set of methodological dispositions err in doing so. The Christian theist, who rejects as too narrow the basic sources of evidence allowed by the naturalist, cannot be faulted for so doing, unless his own research program should prove to be self-defeating.

#### 2.5.4 Epistemological Pluralism

Our present situation, Wolterstorff reflects, is thus one of extraordinary epistemological pluralism.<sup>143</sup> Most philosophers no longer accept that philosophy requires shared foundations, a sort of "public philosophical reason" which the philosopher should employ in arriving at philosophical conclusions and in trying to persuade others.<sup>144</sup> Philosophy is now widely

<sup>141</sup> Rea, *World without Design*, 63–67; cf. 1–7.

<sup>142</sup> Rea, *World without Design*, 72.

<sup>143</sup> Wolterstorff, "How Philosophical Theology Became Possible," 161; cf. Zimmerman, "Three Introductory Questions," 11, on the sense in which contemporary analytic philosophy can be said to be "post-modern."

<sup>144</sup> Wolterstorff, "How Philosophical Theology Became Possible," 163. Cf. John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," in *The Law of Peoples with "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 129–180. Unfortunately, in his contribution to an influential theological handbook Gordon Graham has failed to absorb the point. While acknowledging "the re-emergence of a measure of intellectual conversation" between philosophy and theology in the late twentieth

assumed by analytic philosophers to be a dialogical pluralist enterprise.<sup>145</sup> Even if the Christian philosopher is apt to be more successful in persuading others if he restricts himself to arguments employing public philosophical reason, it is difficult to see why the Christian philosopher in arriving at philosophical conclusions himself should pretend that he does not know what he really knows by restricting his basic sources of knowledge to secular sources. Indeed, such pretense makes a sham of philosophy as a quest for truth. The Christian philosopher of religion should freely employ all his basic sources of knowledge, including divine revelation, in which case any difference between the Christian philosopher of religion and the Christian systematic theologian on the basis of their sources evaporates.

My conclusion will be vigorously repudiated by some non-Christian philosophers. For example, Paul Draper and Ryan Nichols charge that contemporary philosophy of religion is unhealthy and even diseased because its religious practitioners suffer unconsciously from cognitive biases due to the peculiar influence of their religious beliefs and practices and that this

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century, he continues to speak of the “seemingly permanent divergence of theology and philosophy” (Graham, “Philosophy,” 514). On what basis does he make this judgement? He writes:

Plantinga, Swinburne, and others. . . have brought renewed strength and vigor to the philosophical discussion of religion and theology. It would not be true to say, however, that the separation of theology and philosophy which began with modern philosophy has been reversed to any great extent. . . . metaphysicians in general have not turned back to theology. The philosophical investigation of theological topics has become a branch of philosophy in its own right, and even includes the investigation of strictly doctrinal subjects such as the incarnation, the Trinity, original sin, and predestination. . . . But the closeness of this engagement with doctrinal subjects, while being accorded intellectual respect, has further displaced philosophical theology from the heart of philosophy. Whereas formerly it encompassed and influenced the core areas of metaphysics, moral philosophy, and epistemology, contemporary philosophy of religion is to be ranked alongside other respected but more peripheral branches, such as aesthetics and political philosophy. Both these areas look back to a venerable history they can claim as their own, and both can name figures past and present as major contributors to the western philosophical tradition. Nevertheless, neither would take precedence over metaphysics, moral philosophy, or epistemology in the story of that tradition, and this is reflected in the ‘optional’ status of both in the typical curriculum” (Graham, “Philosophy,” 524–525).

Freedom from public philosophical reason does not require that most metaphysicians turn back to theology or that philosophy of religion take precedence over the core areas of metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology! One hardly expects that most philosophers should convert to Christian theism or surrender their naturalized epistemology. But, as Graham acknowledges, Christian philosophers now have a respected place at the table. And in those core areas as well, Christian philosophers of religion have made major contributions to metaphysics (e.g., Peter van Inwagen’s Platonism), ethics (e.g., Robert Adams’ Divine Command Theory), and epistemology (e.g., Plantinga’s account of warrant). The point is that in our situation of epistemological pluralism theology is no longer excluded from philosophy.

<sup>145</sup> Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible,” 166. Moreover, Christian philosophy itself is a pluralistic enterprise, as emphasized by J. Aaron Simmons, “Introduction: Why This? Why Now?” in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Simmons, 1–17. None of the essayists in *Christian Philosophy*, including non-Christian philosophers, claim with Tillich that there is and can be no such thing as Christian philosophy. At most John Schellenberg claims that “Plantinga-Style Christian Philosophy” is not philosophy, but theology, because it accepts as basic beliefs which are not part of public philosophical reason (J. L. Schellenberg, “Is Plantinga-Style Christian Philosophy Really Philosophy?” in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Simmons, 229–243). But William Hasker shows convincingly that Schellenberg’s argument is both unsound and self-defeating, since even Reformed epistemologists may embrace arguments of natural theology and Schellenberg’s own criterion for acceptable philosophical discourse is itself a question of dispute and so not part of public philosophical reason (Hasker, “Responding to Challenges,” 289–293).

disease manifests itself in symptoms like excessive partisanship, polemics, narrowness, and use of theological criteria of evaluation.<sup>146</sup> Since these allegations are so severe, I want to look at them in some detail.

Draper and Nichols' twin claims each raise a host of questions. With respect to the alleged symptoms of religiously motivated bias, we need to know whether (i) contemporary Christian philosophers do, in fact, exhibit these traits, (ii) these traits are peculiar to Christian philosophers of religion, (iii) these traits are symptomatic of religious bias, and (iv) these traits are predominantly unhealthy. The listed traits prove to be something of a mixed bag. Although Draper and Nichols make some effort to establish their first claim, they "do not, however, try to *prove* that philosophy of religion exhibits these symptoms."<sup>147</sup> Instead, they "assume that most philosophers familiar with the literature in philosophy of religion will easily recognize them."<sup>148</sup> Of course, these symptoms are recognizable when they occur, but that is not to say that they occur frequently or peculiarly in philosophy of religion or that they are inherently unhealthy.

Consider the use of evaluative criteria that are theological instead of philosophical. I endorse the use of theological criteria of evaluation, since, as we shall see, I take inspired Scripture to be authoritative in matters of doctrine and praxis. Draper and Nichols, by contrast, recommend that we "make a conscious effort to allow. . . the voice of authority to grow dim."<sup>149</sup> To my mind, this is folly, since it assumes that we do not in fact possess divine revelation of truths God wants us to know for the sake of our eternal salvation. For the same reason, I cannot accept their recommendation to "make a conscious decision to accept genuine risk," where that is understood as running the risk of apostatizing.<sup>150</sup> I consider infidelity to be a far worse disease of the soul than cognitive bias. Draper and Nichols understand that some philosophers who are sectarian theists might regard their recommendation as "disloyal to their religious community or to their God."<sup>151</sup> But they admonish us, "Yet in some sense such an attitude involves a lack of faith. If there really is a God and if such a God wants us to engage in inquiry concerning ultimate reality, then surely such a God would want that inquiry to be balanced. Balanced inquiry is, as we pointed out earlier, risky."<sup>152</sup> One wonders how these non-Christian philosophers know what

<sup>146</sup> Paul Draper and Ryan Nichols, "Diagnosing Bias in Philosophy of Religion," *The Monist* 96, no. 3 (2013): 420–446.

<sup>147</sup> Draper and Nichols, "Diagnosing Bias," 421.

<sup>148</sup> Draper and Nichols, "Diagnosing Bias," 421.

<sup>149</sup> Draper and Nichols, "Diagnosing Bias," 440.

<sup>150</sup> Draper and Nichols, "Diagnosing Bias," 441–442.

<sup>151</sup> Draper and Nichols, "Diagnosing Bias," 442.

<sup>152</sup> Draper and Nichols, "Diagnosing Bias," 442.

God wants. God has told us what he wants, and running the risk of apostasy is not on the list.

So far as I can see, Draper and Nichols present no evidence that the use of theological evaluative criteria is the result of (unconscious) bias rather than careful epistemological reflection. They complain that:

positions on an issue are often dismissed simply because they are incompatible with scripture, or more often, with a particular controversial interpretation of scripture that is just assumed to be correct. Reinforcing such behavior is the fact that the motto of one of the premier journals in the field is ‘faith seeking understanding.’ This motto echoes the belief of some of the most influential philosophers of religion (e.g., Plantinga 1984) that philosophers who happen to be Christians should take the truth of Christian doctrines (as they happen to interpret them) as a starting point for *philosophical* inquiry.<sup>153</sup>

The complaint about controversial interpretations’ just being assumed to be correct serves to draw attention to what, in my opinion, is one of the greatest weaknesses of contemporary Christian philosophy, namely, its lack of engagement with the biblical text. Relatively few Christian philosophers make the effort to engage the text seriously. There is no excuse for assuming without argument the correctness of a controversial interpretation. But a far more serious problem is that Christian philosophers too frequently advocate positions in defiance of the clear teaching of Scripture. When it comes to doctrines such as divine aseity, divine foreknowledge (*prognōsis*) of future contingents, the reality of the soul, penal substitution, and so on, Christian philosophers often fail to submit to the authority of Scripture. In other words, the failure to advert to theological criteria of evaluation is all too characteristic of contemporary Christian philosophy. Further, Draper and Nichols’ remarks on “faith seeking understanding” signals their rejection of Reformed Epistemology, to be discussed in the locus *De fide*. Their characterizing, without argument, Reformed Epistemology as “epistemic recklessness” is unjustifiable.<sup>154</sup> In short, although the use of theological evaluative criteria is characteristic of some Christian philosophers in distinction from their secular counterparts, such use cannot justifiably be merely assumed to be unhealthy or the result of bias.

<sup>153</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 422–423. They add, “Of course, there once was a time when philosophy was considered to be the handmaiden of theology. But that time is long since past, and it would be a mistake to try to turn the clocks back” (439). I disagree, and we may rejoice that the mentality of modernism which they endorse is being rolled back. (The journal alluded to is *Faith and Philosophy*, the organ of the Society of Christian Philosophers. The reference is to Plantinga’s “Advice to Christian Philosophers.”)

<sup>154</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 429.

Similarly, when it comes to partisanship, while Christian philosophers do exhibit partisanship in some sense, there is no reason to think that the trait exhibited is peculiar to Christian philosophers or that it is the result of religious bias or is unhealthy. For example, I am a die-hard partisan of the tensed theory of time and a committed Molinist. But such partisanship is characteristic of all fields of philosophy. Witness physicalism vs. dualism in the philosophy of mind, Platonism vs. anti-Platonism in the philosophy of mathematics, retributivism vs. consequentialism in theories of justice, and so on. As an illustration of partisanship, Draper and Nichols point out that “editors of collections on topics in philosophy of religion usually invite both theists and nontheists to contribute, *assuming that they know which side each will take on the topic of the collection*, even when taking the unexpected side is perfectly compatible with the authors’ theism or nontheism.”<sup>155</sup> This illustration is unconvincing. Editors make such selections on the basis of a substantive record of prior publications on the part of contributors so as to ensure a good debate. In secular series such as Routledge’s *Little Debates on Big Questions*, interlocutors are similarly so chosen. Moreover, partisanship is too fine-grained to be plausibly attributed to religious bias, since being a Christian does not make one a Molinist rather than a Thomist or Calvinist, for example. The adoption of such viewpoints is more plausibly largely the result of serious philosophico-theological reflection. And partisanship so understood is not at all unhealthy, it seems to me. It affords opportunities for community, intellectual stimulus, and collaboration with like-minded colleagues.

As for being polemical, while religious bias might promote unhealthy use of polemical language, Draper and Nichols can cite no scientific study supporting such a claim. Is philosophy of religion in any case peculiarly polemical? Draper and Nichols observe, “So far as we know, it is the only area of philosophy in which philosophical opponents are labeled as ‘enemies’” or in which “an argument is called ‘triumphant’ by someone who admits that it fails to establish its conclusion.”<sup>156</sup> This statement is naïve. Not only are the examples mild, but such polemics characterize other fields of philosophy as well. One has only to read the works of physicalists in philosophy of mind to see how substance dualists are ridiculed and excoriated. In philosophy of biology, proponents of so-called Intelligent Design like Stephen Meyer and Michael Behe, despite their impeccably respectful and irenic manner, are routinely denounced and even subjected to name-calling.

<sup>155</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 421.

<sup>156</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 422. The first illustration concerns van Inwagen with respect to the problem of evil and the second Plantinga with respect to the modal ontological argument.

By contrast, analytic Christian philosophy of religion is characteristically respectful, irenic, and almost dry to the point of boredom. I flatly reject the allegation that Christian philosophical discourse is excessively polemical.

Finally, what shall we say about excessive narrowness? Draper and Nichols complain, “Typically, religion is unreflectively equated with some form of theism or even classical theism, and atheism is equated with naturalism or even physicalism, ignoring the broad and plausible territory between those extremes. . . . Nothing equaling this extraordinary lack of interest in the full range of plausible positions can to our knowledge be found in any other area of philosophy.”<sup>157</sup> I am not sure if other areas of philosophy explore the full range of alternatives. In the philosophy of time and space, for example, alternatives to standard relativistic theories affirming relations of absolute simultaneity have until recently been shunned. In philosophy of mathematics, scarcely any philosophers have until recently explored divine conceptualism as an alternative to Platonism about mathematical objects. In any case, any narrowness of focus in Christian philosophy of religion is most plausibly due, not to a lack of objectivity, but to personal interests, time constraints, and to the youthfulness of the discipline as a whole. Can Draper and Nichols seriously complain that “Alternatives like . . . ietsism . . . are rarely mentioned” by Christian philosophers?<sup>158</sup> Am I supposed to spend what little, precious time I have exploring ietsism? At any rate, as the discipline has matured, its focus has steadily broadened to include a wide range of philosophies East and West. Copan and Meister’s *Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (2007) was one of the first attempts to include more diverse perspectives, and the four-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion* edited by Goetz and Taliaferro (2022) includes an amazing sweep of topics (though ietsism still fails to get a mention!). Draper and Nichols should thus conclude that in this respect philosophy of religion is becoming increasingly healthy.

All this concerns their claim that cognitive bias manifests itself in unhealthy symptoms in Christian philosophy of religion. But what about their first claim that Christian philosophers suffer unconsciously from cognitive biases due to the peculiar influence of their religious beliefs and practices? The claim is difficult to assess because, as in Freudianism, a repudiation of the claim is taken to be supportive of the claim. Draper and Nichols write, “One complication of the disease . . . is that many philosophers of religion are likely to be completely unaware that their discipline suffers from it (because the processes contributing to the disease typically

<sup>157</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 422.

<sup>158</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 422. Look it up!

operate at the nonconscious level). In fact, many will, predictably, continue to be unaware of this even after reading this paper because they will deny it.”<sup>159</sup> My rejection of their claim that philosophy of religion is diseased is evidence that I suffer from the disease.

Here we want to know whether (i) Christian philosophers of religion do suffer from cognitive bias, (ii) cognitive bias is peculiar to Christian philosophers of religion, (iii) their cognitive bias is due to religious influences, and (iv) there are not also positive benefits arising from cognitive biases. Draper and Nichols cite various scientific studies revealing that cognitive bias, understood as a lack of objectivity in argument assessment, is a universal condition of mankind. People are inclined to accept arguments that support their own views (confirmation bias) and are disinclined to entertain arguments against their own views (disconfirmation bias).<sup>160</sup> But although Draper and Nichols repeatedly assert that “while cognitive biases are no doubt a problem in all inquiry and in all areas of philosophy, they are particularly damaging to inquiry in philosophy of religion,” they can cite no studies in support of the latter claim.<sup>161</sup> Instead of peer-reviewed, scientific studies, we are provided commonsensical arguments to show that:

similar results are sure to be found when the above experiments are replicated with arguments about religion, especially when using philosophers of religion as participants. First, *philosophers are emotional creatures* like other humans. Second, *professional philosophers of religion would score high on tests of sophistication about arguments in philosophy of religion* as opposed to control participants. Third, *many religious philosophers of religion, having committed their whole lives to a body of religious doctrine, have strong emotions about their religious beliefs*. The last two observations set religious philosophers of religion apart from other groups of philosophers – from, say, four-dimensionalist metaphysicians.<sup>162</sup>

<sup>159</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 435.

<sup>160</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 426.

<sup>161</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 420; cf. 424.

<sup>162</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 428. As putative examples of cognitive bias among Christian philosophers of religion, Draper and Nichols point to (i) Reformed Epistemology’s claim to religious knowledge without proof and (ii) the failure of so-called “skeptical theists” to apply their skepticism equably to inductive evidence in support of theism. Not only do they fail to show that the problem is due to bias, but they fail to reckon with the facts that the public claim of Reformed Epistemologists is conditional: “If Christian theism is true, then . . .” and that philosophers who have emphasized our cognitive limitations, like Stephen Wykstra, Michael Bergmann, and me, reject an inductive inference to God’s goodness in responding to the “evil god” defense of the problem of evil. Such skepticism is not clearly relevant to fine-tuning arguments for a Designer, since one could hardly say that a malicious Designer has designed the world to only look designed.

The first and second reasons do nothing to distinguish Christian philosophers of religion from secular philosophers, since four-dimensionalists are every bit as sophisticated as Christian philosophers and so should suffer from cognitive biases respecting arguments in support of and against a tenseless theory of time just as Christian philosophers do respecting arguments in their field. The whole weight therefore falls on the third point. Although Draper and Nichols argue persuasively that “there are good reasons to believe that the emotional attachments that many religious philosophers have to their religious groups are exceptionally strong,” they fail to provide any evidence that “such influence is especially harmful to inquiry in philosophy of religion.”<sup>163</sup>

In response to the “repeatedly voiced” objection that “inquiry across the whole landscape of philosophy is just as biased as inquiry in philosophy of religion,” they flatly deny it, since it is “based only on the ‘impression’ of the objector.”<sup>164</sup> It is, however, a good impression, supported by various examples and the studies cited showing cognitive bias to be universal. Contrary to Draper and Nichols, none of the studies cited showed cognitive bias to be a peculiar problem of Christian philosophy of religion or “much more damaging to inquiry in philosophy of religion than to inquiry in most other areas of philosophy.”<sup>165</sup>

The question whether cognitive bias is especially harmful raises the question of what exactly the problem of cognitive bias is supposed to be. As Draper and Nichols recognize, bias does nothing to affect the soundness or cogency of the arguments under consideration.<sup>166</sup> To object to a person’s argument because he is biased is to be guilty of argument *ad hominem*. Sometimes Draper and Nichols speak of bias as harmful to philosophical inquiry. Presumably the problem is that biased people will be less likely to arrive at a correct assessment of the arguments. But given that we all suffer from cognitive biases, why not simply admit the fact and then do our best to give an objective assessment of the arguments? If we fail, we can rely on our interlocutors to point out the deficiencies of our arguments.

<sup>163</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 430. They later add, “lest anyone think that our focus on religious philosophers of religion is itself proof of bias, whether conscious or not, on our part, we would like to emphasize that we are not claiming in this paper that the work of nonreligious philosophers of religion is any healthier than the work of their religious counterparts. We simply lack sufficiently compelling data telling us whether or not this is so” (437). This comment is disingenuous. The thrust of their article is that religious philosophy of religion, due to the emotional attachments of its practitioners, is peculiarly susceptible to cognitive bias and therefore less healthy. I consider the question of their own bias momentarily.

<sup>164</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 437.

<sup>165</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 438.

<sup>166</sup> “From our hypothesis that philosophy of religion suffers from cognitive biases and group influence nothing follows about the truth or falsity of any particular philosophical position or about the soundness or unsoundness of any particular philosophical argument” (Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 437).

In fact, just as Erasmus spoke in praise of folly, there are, surprisingly perhaps, some positive benefits arising from cognitive bias. Some of the studies cited by Draper and Nichols reveal that bias can abet careful assessment of arguments. “Participants did not ignore counterevidence to their convictions; instead they thoroughly, carefully *criticized* such evidence. Participants on both sides did not reason impartially, weighing the evidence on both sides independent of their own commitments. Instead, they critically considered the opposite theory more carefully in order to buffer counterevidence with consonant information.”<sup>167</sup> So long as bias does not lead to dishonest practices – which does not seem to be the case for religious bias<sup>168</sup> – it can thus be philosophically productive. Second, bias can make an inquirer more invested in his arguments and in the refutation of opposing arguments, thereby promoting philosophical inquiry. In response to the objection “that ‘motivated cognition’ is more likely to lead to original and sophisticated arguments than cognition that is less ‘passionate,’” Draper and Nichols challenge “the unsupported assumption that more effort will inevitably be devoted to passionate rationalization than to the dispassionate pursuit of truth.”<sup>169</sup> Despite the tendentious re-phrasing of the assumption, it is hard to see why it is any less supported than Draper and Nichols’ claim of peculiar bias among philosophers of religion on the basis of their commonsensical arguments. Indeed, their very claim that emotional investment in a cause due to religious affiliation greatly augments cognitive bias also suggests that such motivated cognition is apt to be more fruitful than dispassionate inquiry. Examples of such motivated cognition are not difficult to find: according to Draper and Nichols the amazing edifice of Alvin Plantinga’s religious epistemology is the result of cognitive bias! Draper and Nichols also respond that “producing philosophically sophisticated arguments is not the only criterion of health in philosophy. Objectivity, though inevitably limited, is itself valuable.”<sup>170</sup> Of course, objectivity is a virtue, but the fact remains that producing philosophically sophisticated arguments is far more fruitful. Thus, cognitive bias can have beneficial effects.

<sup>167</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 425. They further report:

“in the case of confirmation bias, it was found for all groups examined that proponents of an issue sought out more *supporting* than *opposing* arguments. This effect was *significantly more pronounced for sophisticated respondents*, who selected like-minded arguments 70–75 percent of the time. In the case of disconfirmation bias, results showed that participants in both studies, across both issues, took longer to read and process attitudinally challenging arguments” (426).

<sup>168</sup> Studies actually show that “religious priming correlates with honesty” (Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 432).

<sup>169</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 436.

<sup>170</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 436.

Moreover, why must Christian philosophers or any philosophers consider arguments “independent of their own commitments”? As mentioned above, we are within our epistemic rights to philosophize from our openly acknowledged point of view and then do our best at assessment of arguments. Draper and Nichols note that “According to philosophers of religion in the Reformed tradition, all academic disciplines . . . are inherently perspectival. On this postmodern theory of the academy, what we called partisanship or narrowness of focus is arguably just objective inquiry *from a perspective* and so is normal, healthy, and inevitable.”<sup>171</sup> They admit that “There is something right about this objection. There is no ‘view from nowhere’ from which philosophy can be pursued.”<sup>172</sup> But, they insist, “Even if philosophy is perspectival, however, surely the relevant ‘perspectives’ are broad traditions of inquiry, not narrow sectarian religious (or antireligious) outlooks.”<sup>173</sup> But surely Christian theism is a broad enough perspective from which to work! Moreover, I see no reason to think that one is debarred from philosophizing from, say, a Thomist perspective.

Finally, Draper and Nichols respond to the objection that their argument is self-refuting, since it, too, is the result of cognitive bias. They reply, “we may very well have biases concerning religion, but this paper does not defend our religious beliefs.”<sup>174</sup> This reply fails to alleviate the worry. For the cited “studies support the view that human beings are biased in the evaluation of counterevidence to their preferred beliefs,” and Draper and Nichols’ paper certainly expresses their preferred beliefs. Indeed, their religious beliefs and biases cannot be concealed: they explicitly reject biblical authority, prize Rudolf Otto’s apostatizing over his inflexible Lutheran orthodoxy, demean Reformed Epistemology, and show no concern for what Plantinga calls “the battle for men’s souls.” These are unjustified biases that guide their inquiry. Indeed, it is striking and ironic that Draper and Nichols’ paper does not follow their own prescription to Christian philosophers for reducing bias by using “argument construction less often as a method for making cases for the positions they hold, and more often as a method of testing those positions,”<sup>175</sup> but is instead a piece of apologetics, a discipline from which they urge philosophers of religion “to distance

<sup>171</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 435.

<sup>172</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 435.

<sup>173</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 435.

<sup>174</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 437.

<sup>175</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 439.

themselves in every way possible” because it is “antithetical to objective philosophical inquiry” and “inevitably biased.”<sup>176</sup>

Thomas Flint observes:

In recent years, a major change has occurred among those scholars who take both their Christianity and their philosophy seriously. Gone, it seems, are the days when Christians engaged in philosophy were tacitly expected to bracket their religious beliefs when exploring philosophical topics other than, perhaps, those in the philosophy of religion. Gone, too, are the days when the philosophy of religion itself was broadly viewed as involving little more than recapitulations of timeworn arguments for and against the existence of God and lengthy (some might say interminable) discussions of the nature of religious language. By and large, Christians who are also philosophers have come to view these distinctively modern restrictions upon investigating the relations between their religious and philosophical beliefs as both artificial and detrimental to their attempts to fashion a unified picture of the world. They have come to see themselves as, perhaps even primarily as, engaged in what can most properly be called *Christian philosophy*.<sup>177</sup>

What Tillich dismissed as a dream has now become a reality.<sup>178</sup> What, then of the three divergences between philosophy and theology identified by Tillich? As for the first, the detached objectivity, the standpoint which is no standpoint, which supposedly characterizes philosophy but not theology is a self-delusion. In the aftermath of classical foundationalism’s collapse, says Stump, postmodernism has made everyone self-conscious about the way in which claims to rely only on universal and impartial reason are

<sup>176</sup> Draper and Nichols, “Diagnosing Bias,” 439. There is no reason to think that arguing for one’s favored position, a method which is universal in philosophy, is a case of bias, i.e., a lack of objectivity in the assessment of arguments. This is not the place to discuss their several misunderstandings of apologetics.

<sup>177</sup> Thomas Flint, “Introduction,” in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), xi. This invalidates Trent Dougherty’s attempt to differentiate paradigmatic analytic theology from paradigmatic instances of philosophy of religion on the basis of the former’s treatment of topics like soteriological subject matter, historical treatments of the Trinity and incarnation, the role of revelation, and so on, for all of these can be and have been treated by analytic philosophers of religion (Dougherty, “Advice for Analytic Theologians,” 175–176).

<sup>178</sup> Plantinga, for example, is not at all reluctant to talk about specifically *Christian philosophy* (Plantinga, “Christian Philosophy,” 328–352). He distinguishes four divisions of Christian philosophy: (1) apologetics, which, negatively, answers objections to Christian beliefs and, positively, offers arguments in support of Christian beliefs; (2) philosophical theology, which explores the central doctrines of Christian theology utilizing the tools of philosophical analysis; (3) Christian philosophical criticism, which exposes the inadequacy of secular approaches to important philosophical questions; and (4) Christian philosophical construction, which provides a positive Christian understanding of some important philosophical issue. As I have characterized things, (1) and (2) belong to Christian philosophy of religion, while systematic theology includes (2) and the negative aspect of (1). Doubtless the Christian philosopher of religion or systematic theologian will have occasion to indulge in (3) and (4) as well, for example, when treating God’s relationship to time or issues in religious epistemology.

unrealistic.<sup>179</sup> One need not embrace postmodern relativism, she says, to recognize that postmodernists are surely right that everyone begins with some authorities, some testimony accepted on trust, some unexamined set of presuppositions. By the same token, the philosophical theologian is not blinded by bias but, as anyone familiar with current philosophy of religion can testify, is characterized by a commitment to objectivity and very rigorous standards of argument.<sup>180</sup> As for the second alleged divergence, we have seen that the use of purely secular basic sources of knowledge is nothing more than a methodological disposition that the Christian philosopher is free to reject. Indeed, one of the most significant movements within contemporary Christian philosophy has been the flourishing of so-called Reformed epistemology, which postulates other basic sources of knowledge in addition to those recognized by classical foundationalists.<sup>181</sup> Finally, with respect to the third supposed divergence, it is striking that some of the questions that Tillich says that the theologian alone pursues, such as the reality of a *prima causa*, time and eternity, self-estrangement, and so on, are questions pursued by philosophers. The lines of demarcation have been erased, so that speaking of a Christian philosophy of religion is no contradiction.

### 2.5.5 Summary

It is very difficult therefore to discern any difference in principle between the Christian philosopher of religion and the Christian systematic theologian. Apart from apologetics, they handle the same subject matter and do so with the same basic sources of knowledge. So how should they be distinguished? David Shatz notes that unlike largely descriptive disciplines like history or sociology, philosophy is primarily an evaluative discipline. “It is not at all the case. . . that philosophy of religion is *exclusively* an evaluative enterprise, with no descriptive aspect at all. But it is the case that *the philosopher is interested in empirical findings for the sake of answering a larger question*. The philosopher wants to know what empirical findings tell us

<sup>179</sup> Stump, “Athens and Jerusalem.” 49. Ironically, Tillich seemed to already realize this fact. He admits, “Every creative philosopher is a hidden theologian (sometimes even a declared theologian). He is a theologian in the degree to which his existential situation and his ultimate concern shape his philosophical vision” (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:25). “But,” Tillich insists, “the philosopher does not intend to be a theologian. He wants to serve the universal *logos*. He tries to turn away from his existential situation, including his ultimate concern, toward a place above all particular places, toward pure reality” (1:25) This is just to say that the philosopher is self-deceived, whereas the theologian sees more clearly.

<sup>180</sup> Cf. the struggle of Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11, to find “a balance between pure neutrality at one extreme and blind bias at the other.”

<sup>181</sup> To be discussed more fully in our locus *De fide*.

about whether the claims of religion are true and/or rational.”<sup>182</sup> He says, “Alone among the disciplines, it tries to see whether belief in God and other religious beliefs are supported by good reasons or whether, to the contrary, there are good reasons to deny the claims of religion (for example, if some of these claims contradict each other).”<sup>183</sup> This characterization suggests that Christian philosophy of religion will overlap with positive apologetics, as arguments for God’s existence and arguments for Christian theism are evaluated. There is no doubt that such an interest does characterize philosophy of religion. I have argued, on the other hand, that systematic theology does not overlap natural theology and Christian evidences and that the systematic theologian need not take up the task of positive Christian apologetics. But the line of demarcation is not fixed and impassable. Many philosophers of religion have no interest in natural theology but are occupied, for example, with evaluative, philosophical analysis of key theological concepts, while nothing prevents the systematic theologian from discussing arguments for God’s existence should he wish. Neither is required to assess the arguments, and neither is prohibited. Christian philosophy of religion and Christian systematic theology seem to be very much the same.

Back in the early 1960s H. H. Price quipped, “A clergyman, we think, ought to give up his job if he does not believe in God. It almost seems that the philosopher ought to give up his if he does.”<sup>184</sup> The situation has so changed today that the philosopher certainly, if not the clergyman, may keep his job.

<sup>182</sup> Shatz, *Philosophy and Faith*, xiv.

<sup>183</sup> Shatz, *Philosophy and Faith*, xiv–xv. Similarly, Yandell affirms that “Endeavoring to determine the meaning, and the truth value – the *sense* and the *truth-or-falsity* – of religious claims is part and parcel of this discipline” (Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York, Routledge: 2016), xvii). But cf. Michael J. Murray and Michael C. Rea, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Cambridge Introductions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), xii, who take a somewhat more standoffish approach to the evaluative task. They explain that philosophers are usually engaged in the two activities of conceptual clarification and propositional justification. These two activities ask the following two questions: what do *those within the discipline mean* when they affirm the claims they do, and why do *they think* those affirmations are true? This is not exactly the same as asking whether their arguments are good ones. Similarly, Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2, who characterizes philosophy of religion as the critical examination of basic religious beliefs and concepts. To critically examine a religious belief involves examining the reasons that have been given for and against the belief, with a view to determining whether there is any rational justification for holding that belief to be true or holding it to be false. “Our purpose in carrying out this examination is not to persuade or convince but to *acquaint* the reader with the sorts of reasons that have been advanced for and against certain basic religious beliefs.” A systematic theologian might well engage in such a non-committal study of theistic arguments.

<sup>184</sup> H. H. Price, “Faith and Belief,” in John Hick, ed., *Faith and the Philosophers* (London: Macmillan, 1964), 3.

### 3 Truth in Theology

I have characterized systematic theology as propositional in nature, involving the formulation of a logically coherent worldview that takes into account what we learn from all our basic sources of knowledge. Accordingly, systematic theology is both truth-apt and aimed, at least, at truth.

The biblical conception of truth is quite multifaceted. The Bible typically uses the words “true” or “truth” in non-philosophical senses to indicate such qualities as fidelity, moral rectitude, reality, and so forth. Occasionally, however, the Scriptures speak of truth in the more philosophical sense of veracity, and, of course, the biblical writers everywhere presuppose that what they are writing is true in this same sense, that is, that they are not writing falsehoods. So Christian theology certainly has a stake in the philosophical conception of truth.

That being so, however, it remains the case that there is no peculiarly Christian theory of truth. This is just as it should be, for if Christianity presented a distinctive definition and standards of truth, then its claim to be true would be circular or system-dependent and therefore trivial. But the Christian faith means to commend itself in the marketplace of ideas. The Christian faith claims to be true in the common, ordinary sense of that word and leaves the enunciation of a more careful definition to the philosophers. Thus, when philosophers formulate various theories of truth, such as the correspondence theory of truth, the coherence theory of truth, or the existence theory of truth, none of these can be christened as *the* Christian Theory of Truth, and there have been Christian philosophers among the adherents of each one.

#### 3.1 Truth as Correspondence

Since truth is one of the central and largest subjects in philosophy,<sup>185</sup> our remarks here can be only cursory. Whatever theory of truth one adopts, we shall want to affirm that truth entails correspondence with reality. This insight goes back to Aristotle and beyond. According to Aristotle, “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false; while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true.”<sup>186</sup> Aristotle is here providing the conditions under which something is truly asserted, rather

<sup>185</sup> Michael Glanzberg, “Truth,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2023 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/truth/>. Glanzberg surveys current theories of truth.

<sup>186</sup> Aristotle *Metaphysics* IV.7.1011b25.

than giving a definition of truth itself, and his enormously influential characterization seems quite correct. During the Middle Ages, philosophers addressed the question of truth more directly, Thomas Aquinas characterizing truth as the correlation of intellect and reality. In other words, if reality is as the intellect judges it to be, then truth is a quality inhering both in the judgement and in the intellect itself. Among contemporary correspondence theorists, truth is likewise conceived as a property of either sentences or propositions which correspond to the world as it actually is. Thus, for example, the statement “Snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white. Such an understanding of truth, even if not taught by the Bible, seems wholly compatible with biblical ideas about truth and very plausible, if not obvious, in its own right.

It is often asserted that a view of truth as correspondence entails that truth is a substantial property involving a word-world relation between the singular terms of a true sentence and mind-independent objects in the world. Michael Devitt provides a particularly clear statement of this claim:

Consider a true sentence with a very simple structure: the predication ‘*a* is *F*’. This sentence is true in virtue of the fact that there exists an object which ‘*a*’ designates and which is among the objects ‘*F*’ applies to. So this sentence is true because it has a predicational structure containing words standing in certain referential relations to parts of reality and because of the way that reality is. Provided that the reality is objective and mind-independent, then the sentence is *correspondence*-true: its truth has all the features that we have just abstracted from classical discussions.<sup>187</sup>

Such an understanding of truth as correspondence is, however, outrageously inflationary and threatens to saddle us with all sorts of unwanted ontological commitments. For example, the truth of “God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness and wickedness of men” would *prima facie* require that there are objects in the world like wrath, unrighteousness, and wickedness. Fortunately, taking truth to be the property of *corresponding with reality* does not require the sort of word-world relation that Devitt imagines. Far too many philosophers, it seems, are still in the thrall of a sort of picture theory of language according to which singular terms in true sentences must have corresponding objects in the world.<sup>188</sup>

<sup>187</sup> Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 28. Cf. Michael Rea’s unfortunate characterization of theological realism as committed to the claim that “theological theories and doctrines . . . are true only if the objects they apparently refer to genuinely exist” (Rea, *Essays in Analytic Theology*, 1:7).

<sup>188</sup> John Heil observes that while most analytic philosophers would agree that the picture theory – the core idea of which is that the character of reality can be “read off” our (suitably regimented) linguistic

Such a view is quite mistaken.<sup>189</sup> It is a datum of ordinary language that we frequently assert true statements which contain singular terms that do not denote existent objects. Consider the following examples:

- The weather in Atlanta will be hot today.
- Sherrie's disappointment with her husband was deep and unassuageable.
- The price of the tickets is ten dollars.
- Wednesday falls between Tuesday and Thursday.
- His sincerity was touching.
- James couldn't pay his mortgage.
- The view of the Jezreel Valley from atop Mt. Carmel was breathtaking.
- Your constant complaining is futile.
- Spassky's forfeiture ended the match.
- He did it for my sake and the children's.

It would be fantastic to think that all of the singular terms featured in these plausibly true sentences have objects in the world corresponding to them. Examples like these are legion. In fact, I suspect that singular terms which refer to real world objects may actually be the *exception* rather than the rule in ordinary language.

The unit of correspondence, so to speak, need not be thought of as individual words or other sub-sentential expressions.<sup>190</sup> Rather correspondence may be taken to obtain between a sentence as a whole and the world. Such holistic correspondence is in line with Alfred Tarski's famous T-schema stating a material condition on any theory of truth:

T. "S" is true iff S.

So according to (T), "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white.

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representations of reality – is hopeless, it remains widely influential (John Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003], 5–6). John Searle takes the picture theory to be based on a misconstrual of a correspondence theory of truth, "a classic example of how we are misled by the surface grammar of words and sentences" (John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* [New York: Free Press, 1995], 214; cf. 205). See also Heather Dyke, *Metaphysics and the Representational Fallacy*, Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy (London: Routledge, 2008), 21.

<sup>189</sup> See Arvid Båve, "A Deflationary Theory of Reference," *Synthese* 169 (2009): 51–73, for a deflationary theory of reference, a natural accompaniment for a deflationary theory of truth.

<sup>190</sup> Cf. John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 12–13, 61–62, where so-called assertives are said to commit the speaker merely to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition. So there are presumably true sentences containing non-referential singular terms like "the weather," "the way we live now," or "the reason I like bears" (John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969], 72–73). In his *Construction of Social Reality*, chap. 9: "Truth and Correspondence," Searle makes it quite clear that truth as correspondence does not require that all the singular terms in a true sentence refer. "The correspondence theory is trivially true, but it misleads us because we think facts must be some complex kinds of material objects and 'correspondence' must name some very general relation of resemblance, or at least isomorphism, between statements and the complex entities that are facts" (213–214), a view he denounces as "absurd" (205).

### 3.2 A Deflationary View of Truth

According to a deflationary view of truth, that is all that the notion of truth as correspondence amounts to. So, in Jody Azzouni's words, "the deflationist theory of truths . . . denies that there can be any useful categorizations of truths in terms of substantial truth properties."<sup>191</sup> The key to Azzouni's claim is obviously the adjective "substantial," for it is easy to think of insubstantial properties which all true statements have in virtue of being true, for example, *being believed by God*. As an omniscient being, God has the property of knowing only and all truths, so that every true statement has the property *known by God*. But that need not be taken to be a substantial property of true statements in a theory of truth. Similarly, every true statement has the property of corresponding with reality in the sense mentioned above, but that hardly seems a substantial property of such statements. It is trivial that a statement "S" is true if and only if what "S" states is the case.<sup>192</sup>

<sup>191</sup> Jody Azzouni, "Deflationist Truth," in *The Oxford Handbook of Truth*, ed. Michael Glanzberg (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 477–502.

<sup>192</sup> R. C. S. Walker notes that while a correspondence theory can construe truth as a relation between a proposition and something in the world, there is no reason to say anything more than that a proposition is true iff things are as it says they are, which does not commit us even to an ontology of facts. Such an "unexciting" correspondence theory is quite consistent, he points out, with a redundancy theory of the truth predicate (Ralph C. S. Walker, "Theories of Truth," in *Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy 10 [Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997], 313, 321–323, 328).

Construing truth to be the property of corresponding to reality might seem to commit one to the reality of *abstracta* like propositions, which would be pretty exciting. For reading Tarski bi-conditionals from right to left implies that if *S*, then it is true that "*S*." Tarski's T-schema, though stated for a language *L*, cannot reasonably be thought to take sentence tokens of *L* as substituends for *S* because the right-to-left implication of the Tarski bi-conditionals seems clearly false: If we take "that *S*" to be a singular term referring to some object, then in many cases the thing that is true can only be some abstract, non-linguistic entity. Take, for example, truths which were true during the early universe like *No sentient life exists*. If no sentient life exists, then it is true that no sentient life exists, and the truth bearer which is the referent of the relevant singular term must be an abstract entity.

The reification of a "that" clause seems to me, however, a prime example of an empty nominalization. See A. N. Prior, *Objects of Thought*, ed. P. T. Geach and A. J. P. Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 16–30, who rejects "the whole game of 'nominalizing' what aren't really names of objects at all." Prior points out that when we say that John fears that so-and-so, we do not mean that John fears a proposition. Rather expressions like "\_\_\_ fears that \_\_\_" have the function of forming sentences from other expressions, the first of which is a name and the second of which is a sentence. They are, as Prior nicely puts it, predicates at one end and sentential connectives at the other. So an expression like "It is true that \_\_\_" is a sentential connective, not a property ascription to an object.

In any case the adherent of a neutral logic (see this *Systematic Philosophical Theology*, vol. IIa, *De Deo*, pt. I, *Attributa Dei* 4: Aseity) will be unfazed even by the claim that there is a proposition which is true, since in neutral logic "there is" is no more ontologically committing than the use of singular terms in true statements. As we shall see, neutralism challenges the traditional criterion of ontological commitment of Quinean provenance according to which the values of variables bound by the first-order existential quantifier or referents of singular terms in sentences taken to be true must exist. So even if we take that-clauses like "that snow is white" to be singular terms referring to entities to which truth is ascribed, as in "It is true that snow is white" or alternatively, "That snow is white is true," we have not thereby committed ourselves to the reality of propositions. The neutralist can help himself with equanimity to statements like "It was true during the Jurassic Period that no human beings exist" and "That no bachelor is married is necessarily true." For discussion, see my *God and Abstract Objects: The Coherence of Theism III: Aseity* (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2017), chap. 11.

As Azzouni emphasizes, one can, by and large, eliminate the truth predicate simply by semantically descending from speaking of the truth of *S* to simply asserting *S* itself. So rather than assert that “It was true during the early universe that no sentient life existed,” we can just assert, “During the early universe no sentient life existed,” a view that Azzouni calls semantic descent deflationism. In Azzouni’s view instances of the T-schema merely illustrate how the predicate “true” functions as a device of semantic ascent, enabling us to talk of the truth of a statement in place of asserting it. It is “a device that correlates statements with nominalizations – descriptions or names – of those statements, so that statements containing the latter descriptions or names can stand stead for the statements themselves.”<sup>193</sup>

Why is a device of semantic ascent useful or needed in natural languages? Why not just embrace a redundancy theory of truth, which treats the truth-predicate as superfluous? The answer, says Azzouni, is that the truth-predicate serves the purpose of blind truth ascriptions. In many cases we find ourselves unable to assert the proposition or propositions said to be true because we are incapable of rehearsing them due to their sheer numerosity, as in “Everything the Pope has said is true,” or because we are ignorant of the relevant propositions, as in “Everything stated in the classified documents is true.” In theory even blind truth ascriptions are dispensable if we substitute for them infinite disjunctions or conjunctions like “Either *p* or *q* or *r* or . . . .” While such infinite disjunctions and conjunctions are unknowable by us, they are known to an omniscient deity, so that God has no need of blind truth ascriptions. Hence, he has no need of semantic ascent and, hence, no need of the truth-predicate, which underlines the fact that such ascriptions are not ascriptions of a substantial truth property.

### 3.3 *Truth and Truthmakers*

Azzouni, however, thinks that a deflationary view of truth is incompatible with truth as correspondence because he closely connects a view of truth as correspondence with so-called truthmaker theory. He asserts, “Whether truths share some relational property or other – for example, correspondence, coherence, etc. – or whether they don’t, turns on issues about the nature of the grounds of truths: What it is – if anything – that makes statements true.”<sup>194</sup> Azzouni thinks that a statement corresponds to reality only

<sup>193</sup> Azzouni, “Deflationist Truth,” 12. Seeing the truth predicate as a device of semantic ascent is the key to Arvid Båve’s nominalistic deflationary theory of truth, which is a purely semantic theory of truth. See Arvid Båve, *Deflationism: A Use-Theoretic Analysis of the Truth-Predicate*, Stockholm Studies in Philosophy 29 (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2006).

<sup>194</sup> Azzouni, “Deflationist Truth,” 41.

if the statement's truthmakers are the denotations of the singular terms employed (or the values of variables bound by the existential quantifier) in that statement. But Azzouni's assumption seems to be unjustified for two reasons.

First, if the unit of correspondence is entire statements, then correspondence does not require that a statement's truthmakers be the objects referred to or quantified over in the statement. For example, the statement "John couldn't pay his mortgage" is true and so corresponds to reality, but its truthmakers will not include a socially constructed non-entity like a mortgage. Truthmaker proponents like John Heil and Heather Dyke have similarly emphasized that the truthmakers of a sentence need not be the referents of the singular terms in the sentence. Dyke calls the assumption that descriptions of reality generate a metaphysics "the representational fallacy." It is a fallacy because "Just knowing that a sentence is true does not tell you what makes it true."<sup>195</sup> She notes that if the sentence, not the word, is the primary bearer of meaning, we do not have to accept that there is some entity which is the referent of every word.<sup>196</sup> She maintains merely that if a domain of discourse includes true sentences, then there is *something* about the world that constitutes the truthmaker for those sentences. So in her view, for example, one cannot infer the reality of mathematical objects from true mathematical sentences, and it remains an open question what the truthmakers for mathematical theories are.<sup>197</sup> Thus, the failure of a sentence's singular terms to have real world referents does not imply that such a sentence is not a true description of reality and so fails to correspond to reality.

Second, not all statements corresponding to reality need have truthmakers. Truthmaker maximalism is a controversial doctrine with which the deflationary theorist need not be burdened.<sup>198</sup> Trenton Merricks has argued persuasively that at most only truths about what properties are actually

<sup>195</sup> Dyke, *Metaphysics and the Representational Fallacy*, 5; cf. Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View*, chap. 7.

<sup>196</sup> Dyke, *Metaphysics and the Representational Fallacy*, 35. Dyke's defense of her view is incomplete because she evidently needs a theory of reference like Båve's, according to which singular terms in a true sentence need not refer to real world objects, which she has not provided. She fails to explain why it is a representational fallacy to infer real world objects from successfully referring singular terms. She merely shows that a sentence can have as its truthmakers something other than the putative objects referred to by the sentence's singular terms. That she rejects standard theories of reference is clear from her asseveration that she never endorses a move from features of language to features of reality.

<sup>197</sup> Dyke, *Metaphysics and the Representational Fallacy*, 164–65.

<sup>198</sup> See the seminal article by Kevin Mulligan, Peter Simons, and Barry Smith, "Truth-Makers," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 44, no. 3 (1984): 287–321. An informative survey of the historical background of truthmaker theory may be found in Peter Simons, "Tatsache II," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, and Gabriel Gottfried (Basel: Schwabe, 1998), 10:913–916. See further John F. Fox, "Truthmaker," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 2 (1987): 188–207; Herbert Hochberg, "Truth Makers, Truth Predicates, and Truth Types," in *Language, Truth, and Ontology*, ed. Kevin Mulligan, Philosophical Studies Series 51 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 87–117.

had by actually existing things must have truthmakers.<sup>199</sup> He furnishes a good number of exceptions to the doctrine of truthmaker maximalism, such as negative existentials and universal generalizations like “Hobbits do not exist” and “All ravens are black,” moral truths like “Innocent persons ought not to be tortured,” tensed truths like “The Trojans were defeated,” modal truths like “There might have been a dozen more fundamental particles,” counterfactuals of freedom like “If agent *S* were in circumstances *C*, he would freely do action *A*,” and dispositional truths like “If this glass were struck, it would shatter.”<sup>200</sup> Merricks concludes, “Some truths are not true in virtue of how they are related to any existing entity or entities. So we should reject any theory of truth that implies that every truth is true in virtue of how it is related to some existing entity or entities.”<sup>201</sup> Still, it seems obvious that such truths do tell us about how the world is and so can be said to correspond with reality. In rejecting a correspondence theory of truth, Merricks, like Azzouni, seems to be presupposing a view of correspondence according to which terms used successfully to refer must have real world objects corresponding to them.<sup>202</sup> But if we adopt a deflationary theory of reference, then, as Merricks’ examples illustrate, truths corresponding to reality need not have truthmakers at all.

### 3.4 *Modern and Post-Modern Denials of Theological Truth*

So what contribution does Christian theology have to make to a discussion about truth? It tells us specifically that we can truly assert things about God, and this is not trivial. For certain schools of modern and post-modern thought deny that there are any objective theological truths. Atheists and theists may disagree as to which propositions about God are true or false – the theist holding that the proposition *God exists* has the value *true* and the atheist holding that this proposition has the value *false* – but at least both

<sup>199</sup> Trenton Merricks, *Truth and Ontology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), xvii; cf. 168.

<sup>200</sup> Merricks presents persuasive objections to appealing to some totality state of affairs to serve as the truthmaker of negative existentials and universal generalizations, among them the counter-intuitive implication that since “Hobbits do not exist” and “All ravens are black” have the same truthmaker, it follows that if there were white ravens, then the truthmaker for “Hobbits do not exist” would not exist (Merricks, *Truth and Ontology*, 63). The truthmaker of a dispositional truth like “If this glass were struck, it would shatter” must necessitate all truths entailed by it; but there is no entity that is a truthmaker for that conditional that necessitates “There is no sorcerer who would keep this glass from shattering, were it struck” (162).

<sup>201</sup> Merricks, *Truth and Ontology*, 181.

<sup>202</sup> Indeed, Merricks argues that truthmaker theory requires that the truthmakers of a statement are the things that the statement is about (Merricks, *Truth and Ontology*, 26). This requirement makes truthmaker theory all the more implausible. As Merricks comments, the way in which every true statement is “about something” is not a matter of there being something that that statement is about. To know what a statement is about, he says, is not to know of some object or state of affairs to which that statement is related by an *aboutness* relation but rather is simply to understand the statement (Merricks, *Truth and Ontology*, 32–33).

agree that there are propositions about God and that these are not truth valueless. Some schools of modern and post-modern thought, however, do not concur.

### 3.4.1 Verificationism

Consider, for example, the challenge of Verificationism, to which we have already alluded. During the heyday of Logical Positivism in the thirties and forties, it was widely thought among philosophers that there are no propositions about God, that sentences including the word “God” are in fact meaningless, in the sense that they make no assertion but are employed merely to express the user’s attitudes and emotions. According to the Positivists’ Verification Principle of Meaning, which went through a number of revisions, an informative sentence in order to be meaningful must be capable in principle of being empirically verified.<sup>203</sup> Since theological statements could not be empirically verified, they were regarded as factually vacuous. Now it hardly needs to be said that such an interpretation of theological discourse represents neither the viewpoint of the biblical writers nor of the common religious believer. They typically mean by their religious statements precisely what those statements appear to assert, for example, the statement “God created the world” is an assertion that God created the world.

Fortunately, it was soon discovered that the Verification Principle would force us to dismiss as meaningless not only theological statements, but also a great many scientific statements – along with ethical, aesthetic, and metaphysical statements as well –, so that the Principle was wholly unreasonable. Even more fundamentally, it was realized that the Principle was self-refuting. The sentence “An informative, meaningful sentence must be capable in principle of being empirically verified” is not itself capable of being empirically verified. The Verification Principle is therefore by its own criterion a meaningless combination of words, which need hardly detain the theist, or at best an arbitrary definition, which the theist is at liberty to reject. Therefore, Logical Positivism and its Verification Principle have been almost totally abandoned by philosophers, though it is surprising the degree to which the positivistic attitude persists in some non-philosophical fields, particularly among scientists who were educated during the positivist era.<sup>204</sup>

<sup>203</sup> A meaningful sentence might be analytic, that is to say, true simply by definition of its terms, e.g., “All bachelors are unmarried,” and therefore trivially true, i.e., uninformative.

<sup>204</sup> For example, Stephen Hawking confessed, “I’m a positivist. . . . I don’t demand that a theory correspond to reality because I don’t know what it is. . . . All I’m concerned with is that the theory should predict the results of measurements” (Stephen Hawking in *The Nature of Space and Time*, by Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996], 121). David Hutchings reminds me that given

### 3.4.2 Mystical Anti-Realism

A second denial of theological truth comes from the quarter of Eastern mysticism and its Western progeny. According to this perspective, which we may call Mystical Anti-Realism, there are propositions about God all right, but they are not truth-apt; they are all of them truth valueless. Thus, propositions expressed by sentences like “God exists,” “God is good,” or “The world was created by God” are neither true nor false, having no truth value. God is said to transcend all categories of human thought and language, so that it is quite impossible to assert any truths about God, as Christian theology pretends to do. Indeed, we should not even speak of God, but use instead some non-descript designation for the ultimate reality, such as “The Real.”<sup>205</sup>

Unfortunately, it is far from clear what is meant by the Mystical Anti-Realist claim that God is “above human thought and language.” Perhaps the best sense that we can make of this claim is that what logicians call the Principle of Bivalence fails to be valid for propositions about God.<sup>206</sup> The Principle of Bivalence states that for any proposition  $p$ ,  $p$  is either true or false. The Principle is very closely related to the Law of Excluded Middle, one of the famous three “laws of thought,” which states that for any proposition  $p$  and its negation  $\text{not-}p$ , either  $p$  is true or  $\text{not-}p$  is true. The claim under consideration is that propositions referring to God are neither true nor false.

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Hawking’s philosophical naiveté, it is not clear that he really means to endorse classical logical positivism. Among philosophers, “it is virtually impossible anymore to find any self-respecting philosopher who will call himself or herself a positivist” (Michael Peterson et al., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 3). Zimmerman adds, “Nowadays, hardly any analytic philosophers will still try to argue that theological statements are meaningless, or that the very idea of God is obviously incoherent; and the ones who do are regarded as dinosaurs from a bygone era – the unaccountable age when positivists ruled the earth” (Zimmerman, “Three Introductory Questions,” 9–10).

<sup>205</sup> Paradigmatic examples of proponents of such a view would be Paul Tillich, for whom God cannot be further characterized than as “the ground of being,” and John Hick, who came to hold that the ineffable Real is misrepresented in Christianity as God (John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989]).

<sup>206</sup> Out of a concern to avoid fatalism the Polish logician Jan Łukasiewicz in 1930 invented multivalent logic, holding that future contingent propositions are neither true nor false but have a third truth value (Jan Łukasiewicz, “Philosophical Remarks on Many-Valued Systems of Propositional Logic,” in *Polish Logic 1920–1939*, ed. Storrs McCall [Oxford: Clarendon, 1967], 53). Multivalent logics have since proliferated. There seems to be a popular misimpression that the very existence of multivalent logic calls into question the Principle of Bivalence. This is, however, incorrect, for the uninterpreted many-valued logical syntax implies nothing about the legitimacy of a semantical interpretation of that syntax in terms of propositions and truth values. Indeed, some of the most useful applications of trivalent logic is to electronic switching circuits, where a switch has three possible positions: 0,  $\frac{1}{2}$ , 1. It is plausible to think that propositions are necessarily bivalent with respect to their truth value, so that a denial of Bivalence for a class of propositions, like propositions about God, would be gratuitous unless motivated by powerful argument. For discussion see Charles A. Baylis, “Are Some Propositions Neither True nor False?” *Philosophy of Science* 3, no. 2 (1936): 156–166; A. A. Zinov’ev, *Philosophical Problems of Many-Valued Logic*, rev. ed., trans. Guido Küng and David Dinsmore Comey, Synthese Library 7 (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1963).

Now on the face of it such a claim is bewildering, for it seems absurd to say that a logical contradiction is not false. But on this view a proposition like *God both exists and does not exist* is not false. Neither is it true that *God either exists or does not exist*. Such propositions seem to be necessarily true. On this basis alone the Mystical Anti-Realist claim ought to be rejected. It avails the Mystical Anti-Realist nothing to deny in reply the Law of Contradiction, for if the Law fails, then falsity of the Law would not preclude its truth. The objector must assume that if the Law is false, it is not also true, which just is to affirm the Law. Thus, in the very denial of the Law one affirms it, so that one's position is self-defeating.<sup>207</sup> The problem is not that the objector's denial is logically inconsistent, but rather that the denial refutes itself.

Moreover, the Mystical Anti-Realist claim itself is self-refuting. Consider the statement "The Real is identical to the God of the Bible." Since the Principle of Bivalence fails for propositions about the Real, this statement cannot be true. But neither is it supposed to be false. But how could it not be false? For the God of the Bible can be described by bivalent propositions, like "God is just," "God is good," "God created the world." But the Real cannot be described by bivalent propositions. So given the indiscernibility of identicals, the Real cannot be identical to the God of the Bible. But if the Real is not identical to the God of the Bible, then it is true that "The Real is not identical to the God of the Bible," which is a bivalent statement about the Real. But Mystical Anti-Realism says that there are no bivalent propositions about the Real. So the position is logically self-refuting.

Perhaps the Mystical Anti-Realist will try to save his position by denying that the Real cannot be described by bivalent propositions. After all, the Principle of Bivalence fails for this proposition as it does for others about the Real. But how can the Mystical Anti-Realist coherently deny that the Real cannot be described by bivalent propositions while affirming that the Principle of Bivalence fails for propositions about the Real, since these two statements are synonymous and so express the same proposition?

Suppose the Mystical Anti-Realist says that neither the statement "The Real is identical to the God of the Bible" nor the statement "The Real is

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<sup>207</sup> As argued by Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, chap. 5; Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, xvii–xviii; Stuart C. Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim: A Philosophical and Critical Apologetic* (1984; rep. ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 17–29. For a critique of theologies exploiting the violation of the Law of Contradiction by certain non-classical logics, see Andrew Ter Ern Loke, "The Law of Non-Contradiction and Global Philosophy of Religion," *Sophia* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-024-01001-5>.

not identical to the God of the Bible” is true. What, then, of the statement “The Real is identical to the Real”? Some mystical Anti-Realists grant that such purely formal statements are true of the Real. But this is fatal to the position. For then the sentence “The Real is identical to  $x$ ” is satisfied by the Real but is not satisfied by the God of the Bible. So the Real and the God of the Bible cannot be identical. But then it is true that “The Real is not identical to the God of the Bible,” which is a bivalent statement about God.

On the other hand, if the Mystical Anti-Realist denies that it is true that “The Real is identical with the Real,” then by the same token neither is it false that “The Real is not identical with the Real.” The Mystical Anti-Realist has thus denied the Law of Identity as well as the Law of Contradiction, the most basic laws of logic, so that his position is irremediably logically incoherent.

The Anti-Realist might retort that the above only shows that rational paradox is inevitable when we try to talk about God. But that is not the case. So long as we respect the Principle of Bivalence we can discourse perfectly coherently about God. What is incoherent is the Anti-Realist’s denial of the validity of the Principle for propositions about God. His position is analogous to other self-refuting affirmations like *Only verifiable propositions are meaningful* (itself an unverifiable proposition). The one who denies that the Principle of Bivalence is valid for propositions about God is in the very denial affirming a bivalent proposition about God. It is not God that is the source of the incoherence, but merely the objector’s view itself.

In any case, it is clear that *no reasons* can be offered for adopting the view that the Principle of Bivalence is not valid for propositions about God. For any purported reason for adopting this view would involve affirming certain truths about God, which the position prohibits. For example, if it is said that the Principle fails because “God is too great to be grasped by human categories of thought” or “God is wholly other,” or “God transcends human language,” then all of these are bivalent propositions about God. But the position holds that there are no bivalent propositions about God. Thus, none of these statements can be true and so can furnish no grounds for adopting the position in question. The position can be embraced only by an arational leap of faith. But surely, as rational men and women, we ought to be extremely reluctant to commit intellectual suicide for no reason whatsoever when it comes to theology. In the absence of any reason to abandon rational thought in this realm, we ought to continue to employ the rational canons of thought which have proved so fruitful in other disciplines.

### 3.4.3 Radical Pluralism

A final contemporary attack on theological truth as the Christian understands it is what we might call Radical Pluralism. With roots in Eastern mysticism and radically individualized through the influence of Kant's Critical Philosophy, this view holds that each individual constitutes reality himself, so that there is no trans-subjective truth about the way the world is. On this view, the popular expression "It may be true for you, but it's not true for me" is quite literally correct. At face value, such a view may seem patently absurd: whether we believe the stove burner is on or not, for example, if we put our hand on it and it is on, we shall be burned. It is objectively true that the burner is hot, regardless of our subjective attitude toward it. Similarly, there were surely events going on before we were born which are entirely independent of us: the Big Bang, the era of galaxy formation, the age of the dinosaurs, and so forth. But these absurdities result because we are still thinking of an objective reality and trying to marry subjectivism to it. According to Radical Pluralism, there is no objective reality; there is no overarching way the world is. The world has fallen apart and has been replaced by the world-for-me.

This Radical Pluralism is antithetical to the Christian world view because Christianity ascribes to God a privileged position as the knower of all truth. He stands, as it were, at the pinnacle of the pyramid of diverse perspectives on the world and in the unity of his intellect grasps the world as it is. There is thus on the Christian perspective a unity to truth and reality which is known by God. Radical Pluralists thus often see their task as overtly anti-theological in character. For example, literary critic Roland Barthes writes:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final significance, to close the writing . . . . In precisely this way literature . . . by refusing to assign . . . an ultimate meaning to the text (and to the world as text) liberates what may be called an antitheological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.<sup>208</sup>

It is intriguing that according to Radical Pluralism reason, science, and law are to be rejected along with God. Radical Pluralism thus threatens not merely theology but every discipline at the university.

<sup>208</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 147, cited in Alvin Plantinga, "The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship," in *Seeking Understanding: The Stob Lectures, 1986–1998*, Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 134.

Radical Pluralism is attended by relativism. Since every person creates his own reality, moral values become radically individualized. Reacting to Richard Rorty's view that truth is whatever my colleagues will let me get away with, Plantinga muses that since we have different colleagues, truth on this view is pluralistic because your colleagues may not let you get away with the same things that my colleagues let me get away with. Plantinga responds:

Although this view is very much *au courant* and with-it in the contemporary intellectual world, it has consequences that are peculiar, not to say preposterous. For example, most of us think that the Chinese authorities did something monstrous in murdering those hundreds of young people in Tiananmen Square, and then compounded their wickedness by denying that they had done it. On Rorty's view, however, this is an uncharitable misunderstanding. What the authorities were really doing, in denying that they had murdered those students, was something wholly praiseworthy: they were trying to bring it about that the alleged massacre never happened. For they were trying to see to it that their peers would let them get away with saying that the massacre never happened; that is, they were trying to make it *true* that it never happened; and who can fault them for that? The same goes for those contemporary neo-Nazis who claim that there was no holocaust; from a Rortian view, they are only trying to see to it that such a terrible thing never happened; and what could be more commendable than that? This way of thinking has real possibilities for dealing with poverty and disease: if only we let each other get away with saying that there isn't any poverty and disease – no cancer or AIDS, let's say – then it would be true that there isn't any; and if it were true that there isn't any, then of course there wouldn't *be* any.<sup>209</sup>

The serious point of Plantinga's satirical critique is the sinister nature of Radical Pluralism. Since there is no objective truth, reality is what each individual makes it. In the absence of objective truth, there is nothing to check the unbridled will to power.

Fortunately, Radical Pluralism also seems to be self-refuting. We need only ask ourselves, "Is Radical Pluralism objectively true?" It claims that "There is no objective truth about the world"; but that statement purports itself to be an objective truth about the world. It says that "Each individual constitutes reality, so that there is no objective reality"; but that is itself a statement about objective reality. It states that the proposition *Truth is pluralistic* is objectively true.

<sup>209</sup> Plantinga, "Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship," 133.

The Radical Pluralist cannot escape this incoherence by saying that it is only from his perspective that there is no objective truth about the world. For if that is true only from his perspective, that fact does not preclude that there is objective truth about the world, in which case his perspective is objectively false. If he replies that it is only from someone else's perspective that there is objective truth about the world, then it follows that all truth is perspectival, or that Radical Pluralism is objectively true, which is incoherent.

### 3.5 Summary

In summary, while Christian theology does not propound a particular theory of truth, it is wholly compatible with the traditional correspondence view of truth. The Christian worldview purports to describe reality as it is and therefore to be true. The challenges posed to theological truth by Verificationism, Mystical Anti-Realism, and Radical Pluralism are all ultimately self-defeating and incoherent. Therefore, the task of systematic philosophical theology need not be stymied by them.

## 4 The Organizational Structure of *Systematic Philosophical Theology*

Part of what makes any theology systematic, we have said, is that it exhibits a certain organization or structure, typically along certain themes. To borrow a metaphor, systematic theology attempts to carve theology at its joints.<sup>210</sup> The location of those joints has historically been fairly clear, depending upon how fine one wishes to carve.<sup>211</sup> Origen's *On First Principles* is divided into four books, dealing respectively with God, the world, freedom, and revelation. These are broad categories, the book on the world, for example, including Christology and the book on freedom including eschatology. Lombard similarly divided his *Sentences* into four books, treating respectively the Trinity, creation, Christology, and the sacraments and eschatology. Bonaventure's *Breviloquium (Brief Reading)* (ca. 1257) carves his subject matter more finely into a prologue and seven sections handling the Trinity, creation, sin, Christ, salvation, the sacraments, and eschatology. By contrast, Aquinas' massive and unfinished *Summa theologiae* is divided into three parts, each enormous in extent: part I handles the doctrine of

<sup>210</sup> Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, 1.

<sup>211</sup> See the nice survey in Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:95–100; cf. 26–27.

God in 119 questions, part II treats the doctrine of man in two parts of 114 questions and 189 questions each, and part III deals with soteriology, including Christology, in 90 questions before breaking off unfinished.

The Protestant Reformers brought tremendous advance to the structuring of systematic theology. Philip Melancthon in his *Loci communes* (1521) introduced use of the “common places” or main topics of Protestant systematic theology to structure his work. In subsequent editions of this book until the final edition of the *Loci praecipui theologici* in 1559, the *loci* were greatly refined and expanded. Although shunned by Roman Catholic theologians, the use of the *loci communes* to organize systematic theology became standard practice among Lutheran and Reformed theologians. Standard *loci* included such topics as *De Deo* (God), *De creatione* (creation), *De Christo* (Christ), *De homine* (man), *De gratia* (grace), *De ecclesia* (church), and *De novissimus* (last things). These topics are the subject matter of various sub-disciplines in theology such as theology proper, cosmology, Christology, anthropology, soteriology, and so on. John Webster explains that the typical order of the topics emerges from two principles: (i) that the theme of Christian teaching is God and then things in relation to God, and (ii) that Christian teaching is best ordered by the sequence of the divine economy, in which God’s relation to creatures is unfolded, a sequence set out in Scripture and confessed in the creeds.<sup>212</sup> “Attending to these principles. . . yields an outline in which systematic theology begins with a substantial presentation of the doctrine of God . . . followed by an account of the history of God’s relations to creatures, usually in some combination of episodic and thematic treatment.”<sup>213</sup>

In this work I shall structure our discussion along the lines of the traditionally arranged *loci communes*, since they seem to carve theology at its joints, thereby providing great clarity and thematic unity to our discussion. Since our emphasis is on philosophical theology, our discussion of various *loci* will be disproportionate due both to their varying intrinsic philosophical interest and particularly to this author’s varying philosophical interests. Thus, I shall have a great deal to say, for example, about the doctrine of God but, I anticipate, relatively little about ecclesiology and eschatology. My main departure from the traditional *loci* will be in treating the Doctrine of Scripture (*De Scriptura sacra*) and the relationship between faith and reason (*De fide*), not in the Prolegomena, but as part of the *loci* themselves. These seem to me to be among the important themes treated by systematic

<sup>212</sup> Webster, “Introduction,” 12.

<sup>213</sup> Webster, “Introduction,” 12.

theology rather than part of a prologue to it. Accordingly, I have limited my Prolegomena to introductory or background matters.

In arranging the order of the *loci*, I have followed what one might call an epistemic rather than ontic ordering, beginning, not with God as the source of all reality other than himself, but with Scripture as providing us the normative content of the Christian religion and the basis for our philosophical reflection upon the content of revelation. It would seem to be out of joint to begin, for example, with a discussion of God's attributes as given in the Bible without having first discussed why we are looking to the Bible as a source of information about God. Thereafter, there is a sort of logical order to the *loci* following the unfolding of God's plan for creation and for the salvation and beatification of mankind.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Hollingsworth, Armin Krainer, Winfried Löffler, and Tyler McNabb for discussion of matters of Prolegomena.