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# The Relationship between Theology and Philosophy: Constructing a Christian Worldview

Alan G. Padgett

Luther Seminary, apadgett@luthersem.edu

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# I

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

*Constructing a Christian Worldview*

✧ | Alan G. Padgett | ✧

### THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY AS COLLEAGUES

Tertullian once asked this famous question: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?”<sup>1</sup> Whereas the great rhetorician and second-century apologist meant this as a rhetorical question, I propose in this chapter to take it seriously as an open one: what role does the academy play in the church, and the church in the academy? To focus this large question down to a smaller topic, we will let philosophy, the love of wisdom, stand in for the academy. Theology, the study of God, will likewise stand in for the church. So our question now is this: what concord is there between philosophy and theology?

1. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics* (*De praescriptione haereticorum*) §7.

To give things away just a bit, we are going to find an answer different from the one Tertullian did. Tertullian thought that once we find Christ, we have no more need for philosophy. Perhaps he had in mind the verse from Colossians where Paul warns the church, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition" (Col. 2:8). In this chapter I will argue that theology and philosophy should be colleagues, and will spell out some specific areas where they should work together in the quest for truth.<sup>2</sup>

We might begin with a better understanding of Paul's point in Colossians. Paul was one of the first great intellectuals of the church. He valued wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, but he grounded the quest for truth in Christ. This becomes clear if we take the time to read his whole chapter. He begins chapter 2 telling the church that he wants them to be "encouraged and united in love." Why? "So that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:2–3). The problem in Colossae was that some believers were being led astray by heretical, anti-Christian teachings. This is what Paul is objecting to: not the love of wisdom itself but any human reasoning that sets itself up against the lordship of Christ (Col. 2:6–8). The lesson we learn should be this: knowledge is good but can be corrupted by sin. Wisdom is a good thing, and so is the love of wisdom, but loving the Lord our God with all our mind is greater still (see Matt. 22:37). If Paul is right, then Tertullian must have been wrong. Or was he?

### *What Are Philosophy and Theology?*

To speak of the relationship between philosophy and theology would seem to call for a definition of both—but none is forthcoming. There are no accepted definitions of these two disciplines. Let me say some generally accepted things about them, however, before I go on to hazard a working definition for our present purposes.

First of all, although theology and philosophy are both rigorous academic disciplines, they also speak to that which is beyond academics. Theology here means Christian doctrine, what is sometimes called dogmatics or systematic theology. The origin of Christian teaching lies in faith and worship of Jesus Christ and therefore also of the triune God. When Christians worship together, their hymns, prayers, liturgies, and

2. Many of the working assumptions and perspectives upon which this chapter is based are worked out in Alan G. Padgett, *Science and the Study of God: A Mutuality Model for Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

sermons already contain a good deal of Christian doctrine. Theology is not made up in the seminary but already found in the Christian way of life. Christian doctrine is caught up in Christian practice, in the Christian way of being in the world, both as individual believers and also as a community of the Spirit. For the most part, however, our focus will be on theology as an academic discipline, that is, academic theology. Theology is the study of God, and Christian doctrine is a discipline that studies God and other things in their relationship to God. It seeks the truth about God and the world on the basis of revelation from God, which finds its center in Jesus the Messiah: the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Other religions will thus have different theologies, based upon differing understandings and starting points.

Philosophy, too, points to that which is already larger than the academy. Every person has a basic way of looking at the world, themselves, and other people that informs their day-to-day activities. We could call this a philosophy of life or a worldview. A worldview is, broadly, our understanding of who we are and of the world we live in, including our system of values and our religious beliefs (if any).<sup>3</sup> I use “worldview” in a broad and flexible way and allow that various communities of faith will develop differing worldviews. Indeed, people within the same broad worldview will have important differences among them. The point is that any functioning adult human operates with some philosophy of life or worldview, however implicit.

One task of philosophy is to make our worldviews clear and to criticize them on the basis of reason and experience. People outside the academy can do this well. Philosophers are not limited to colleges and universities! Still, for the most part, in this chapter we will be speaking of philosophy as an academic discipline. As such, philosophy seeks the truth. It does so based upon our common resources as humans, especially reason and experience. Philosophy seeks to answer the larger questions of life, the big questions.<sup>4</sup> It does not concern itself with details about factual matters, which it is happy to leave to the natural and human sciences. Rather, philosophy seeks truth about issues of meaning, interpretation, value, beauty, and existence as a whole, but always with

3. For more on worldviews, see *ibid.*, 74–77; see further David Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

4. The Chinese philosopher Fung Yu-Lan defines philosophy “very briefly” as “systematic, reflective thinking about life.” He then goes on to describe what he means by “systematic” and “reflective,” also noting that “Life is an all-inclusive whole.” The activity of philosophy he calls “the inner-directed development of the human mind.” See Fung Yu-Lan, *A New Treatise on the Methodology of Metaphysics* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1997), 1–2. Cf. Edward Craig, *Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), who writes about “some very general picture of what the world is like” and three basic philosophical questions—value, reality, and knowledge (p. 1).

an eye to rationality, clarity, evidence, and argument. Philosophy thus reflects upon the methods and findings of the other disciplines without seeking to establish or refute their results. It does so not on the basis of faith in Jesus but on the basis of common human reason and experience. In this way philosophy is common to all human cultures. Alvin Plantinga has rightly argued that Christian philosophers should begin their philosophical work on the basis of Christian faith; but philosophy as a discipline does not.<sup>5</sup>

Second, each academic discipline seeks rational knowledge. Both theology and philosophy seek the truth. They both pursue good arguments, logical clarity, fair argumentation, and sound conclusions. And they are both concerned with the larger questions of life. But the focus, goals, and methods of these two disciplines are quite distinct. Theology's goal is to glorify God with our minds and seek the truth as it is in Jesus (Eph. 4:21). As Paul rightly said, scholars of Christian doctrine are not interested in abstract truth but in seeing everything from the perspective of faith in Christ. Philosophy, as a truth-seeking community, is not committed to Christ but seeks the truth on the grounds of our common humanity and life in the world. The rationalities in these different approaches means that conversation between theology and philosophy is bound to be complicated.

Finally, we can agree that there are no pure, eternal, and essential forms of either philosophy or theology. It is important to note the various philosophical schools, for they differ in their approaches, methods, and forms of rationality. In thinking about theology and philosophy, it is important to realize that different disciplines have different traditions, with slightly different understandings of what counts as good evidence and argument. Differing approaches have different background assumptions too, which they will bring to bear in making arguments, setting up questions, and discussing rival theories. All of this means that Christianity can never encounter philosophy pure and simple but always only the philosophy of a particular time, culture, and school of thought. For example, neo-Confucian philosophy in China and Korea is a very different philosophical tradition from, say, Hegel and idealism in Europe. Yet Christianity has encountered both schools and been in very different dialogues with them over the centuries. Philosophy can never encounter a pure and eternal Christian theology either, for there are varying schools

5. The evidence for this is the obvious fact that many perfectly good philosophers are not Christians. We should note that Plantinga's criteria for warranted Christian belief are person-relative. He typically writes about what a Christian can or should or may think, not about what philosophy as a discipline is up to. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 11.

and approaches in the tradition of Christian doctrine as well. Suddenly things are looking complex.

### *Christian Scholarship*

To bring things down to earth somewhat, I am going to suggest some historical examples that will provide us with models of the ways in which theology and philosophy can interact. To further limit the discussion, I will focus on the ways in which theology responds to and uses philosophy. The other side of the coin is just as important. I am certain that theology has important roles as dialogue partner and colleague for philosophy. This is because I believe that a mutuality model best describes the proper relationships between academic disciplines, including theology. But for our purposes in this book, we will focus on just one side of the coin: theology's encounter with philosophy.

For the most part, we will be speaking of academic disciplines, not individuals, when we talk about this encounter. As many philosophers of science have argued in recent times, the rationality of academic disciplines is a learned induction into a community and tradition of scholarship. By a discipline we mean any of the academic traditions of the university, any of the arts or sciences (natural or social). Becoming a scholar in a particular discipline is like being an apprentice in a guild or union: certain assumptions, practices, narratives, and values should be absorbed and mastered not merely by conceptual learning but also by doing. Following Thomas Kuhn, we can call these paradigms.<sup>6</sup> A paradigm is, roughly, a set of practices and beliefs that guides research, theory-making, and evaluation within a tradition of academic and/or scientific inquiry. They can also be called research programs or traditions of inquiry. Paradigms are functional, practical, communal, and traditional. They are not eternal absolutes, nor are they the property of any individual. Such research programs are not all-inclusive, and they make assumptions that call for further philosophical investigation. Thus, *research programs can be shared by people with differing worldviews*. This is a crucial point for understanding the character of Christian scholarship.

The tradition of inquiry I am calling Christian doctrine seeks the truth about God and about other things in relationship with God. For this reason, Christian scholarship is important for the goal of Christian theology. In order to rightly see all things in relationship to God, theologians as a community of scholars need a big-picture view of the truth about crea-

6. Kuhn in turn borrowed the term from Wittgenstein. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). For Wittgenstein's use of this term, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), 50–57.

tures—all creatures. But theology cannot and will not, on its own, find the truth about these matters. For this we depend upon experts in other fields, especially the experts who are willing to interpret the findings of their science or discipline for the larger task of general human understanding (e.g., for the construction and evaluation of worldviews). Thus, theology relies upon experts in all the academic disciplines, many of whom will themselves be believers, who can rightly interpret the results of these other arts and sciences. Only in this way can theology come to see the truth about God and the world made and sustained by God. Creation, sin, providence, Christology, church, eschatology: all of the standard topics of Christian theology touch upon realities outside theology in the strict sense. For example, theologians say that human beings are created in the image of God. What does this mean for our understanding of human nature today? How does this touch upon psychology, anthropology, and sociology? The theologian cannot be an expert in all of these fields. We depend upon others in order to fulfill our vocation.

Fortunately for us, a tradition of Christian scholarship or Christian learning already seeks to understand all of reality from the perspective of a Christian worldview.<sup>7</sup> Each branch of science and the humanities maintains its own standards of good reason, evidence, and argument, but the Christian approaches his or her scientific paradigm from a perspective of faith. In other words, Christian scholars accept the tradition of inquiry or paradigm of their specialty and are willing to be the best philosophers, sociologists, or biologists they can be. But they understand this communal rationality in a larger context. This helps in three ways: (1) a Christian worldview funds and founds the metaphysical, epistemological, and value commitments of a disciplinary paradigm without imposing itself or prejudicing outcomes of investigation; (2) a Christian worldview provides a broad horizon in which the results of research can be interpreted for the larger culture; and (3) when the believing scholar is confronted with theories that are a matter of intense debate within a discipline, a Christian worldview may sometimes guide the scholar in a temporary preference of one theory over the other, subject to further review, evidence, and argument. The Christian will be guided toward the rival theory that best fits with his or her larger worldview, just as any rational being would. This is because we are finally seeking truth, and we expect our truths to all fit together some day (perhaps not in this life). It may be that in the long run, our worldview will need to change

7. For some brief introductions to the idea of Christian scholarship, see Arthur Holmes, *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); and George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

to fit new facts and theories. On the other hand, Christian truth may require that elements of accepted "fact" need to be questioned again. The direction of revision cannot be determined a priori.

### *Models from History*

After considering Christian scholarship in general terms, it is time to focus more specifically on philosophy. We will look at historical examples of the ways in which theologians have encountered and worked with philosophy, not in purely historical terms but as models or types of relationship.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Anselm of Canterbury: Theology Seeks Philosophy**

Anselm (1033–1109), one of the greatest theologians of his age, was a philosopher, monk, abbot, and eventually archbishop of Canterbury. He wrote a number of central and influential works in theology, which helped to establish the scholastic tradition in the High Middle Ages. In an extended prayer to God that is also a meditation on who God is (his *Proslogion*), Anselm comments that our Christian faith is a faith that is seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). This conception of Christian thought as beginning with faith in Jesus and then seeking larger understanding through philosophy has become the most common understanding of theology's method and approach in our time. The Anselmian model, then, starts with faith.

#### **Thomas Aquinas: Philosophy Leads to Theology**

The greatest mind of the Middle Ages was the philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–1274). He developed a complex understanding of the relationship between faith and reason, in dialogue with the best philosophy and science of his time, which were based upon Aristotle. He authored the most important of the ancient systems of Christian theology, his famous *Summa theologiae*. For Aquinas, all things come from and lead back to God. Faith and reason call out to each other. Rightly understood (and this part cannot be ignored), philosophy leads to

8. I borrow the notion of such a typology from H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). We cannot do justice to each scholar in this brief typology. For good introductions to each theologian, see G. R. Evans, *Anselm* (London: G. Chapman, 1989); Brian Davies, *Aquinas* (New York: Continuum, 2002); G. G. Scorgie, *A Call for Continuity: The Theological Contribution of James Orr* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988); James A. Nestingen, *Martin Luther: His Life and Teachings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); and two articles on Bowne by Rufus Burrow: "Borden Parker Bowne," *Methodist History* 36 (1997): 44–54; and "Borden Parker Bowne's Doctrine of God," *Encounter* 53 (1992): 381–400.



and supports faith. Philosophy acts as a *praeambulum fidei*, a journey that leads toward theology. At the same time, philosophy itself seeks to be completed by theology; that is, it seeks to know that which is above and beyond nature by means of a *desiderium naturale*, a natural desire to know the answer to our deepest longings. This intellectual quest can find its true rest only in God. In his *Summa contra gentiles*, Thomas shows how this method can work. The method begins with philosophical exposition and critique, setting the basis of a Christian worldview, but concludes with biblical and theological truths that complete it.

### **Martin Luther: Theology in Tension with Philosophy**

A German monk turned Protestant reformer and Bible professor, Martin Luther (1483–1546) is remembered as the father of the Reformation. Because of his powerful emphasis upon the word of God as the highest court of appeal in Christian life and thought (and so the basis for the reform of the church), Luther was suspicious of the pretensions and arrogance of human reason. All of God's good gifts to human beings, including our reason, have become corrupted by sin and stand in need of redemption through Christ. Luther thought that philosophy was fine as long as it stayed in its own domain and out of theology or the church. In theology the word of God reigns supreme, and philosophy is a humble handmaid at best (a tool of the devil at worst). He was often critical of philosophy and of theologians who relied too heavily upon it.

### **James Orr: Theology Transforms Philosophy**

The Scottish theologian and apologist James Orr (1844–1913) stands in here for the tradition of John Calvin, Luther's contemporary in Switzerland. The Reformed tradition that stemmed from Geneva, and of which Orr was a part, agreed with the doctrine of sin that Luther preached but had a different model of the way in which theology and philosophy can relate. Philosophy on its own may well be a tool for the devil. But for the Reformed tradition, faith can provide the basis for rethinking and reinterpreting the academic disciplines, including philosophy. Orr was a prolific evangelical scholar and a pastor and professor, contributing to numerous works, including magazines, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and books. His series of lectures on the Christian worldview was eventually published as *A Christian View of God and the World* (1893). Orr is a good historical example of one who believed that faith in Christ provides us with a light that can and should illumine our understanding of all reality.

### **Borden Parker Bowne: Theology Becomes Philosophy**

The Methodist philosopher and theologian Borden Parker Bowne (1847–1910) represents our last model, that of liberal Protestant thought. Trained in the German tradition of idealist philosophy, Bowne believed that the Christian faith needed to be defended and revised in keeping with modern culture. A contemporary of James Orr and William James, he founded a school of personalism at Boston that was very influential in its day. At the beginning of the twentieth century, he was the foremost Methodist scholar in America, but he was charged with heresy (and acquitted). Like Hegel and James, he saw philosophy as taking up and almost absorbing the truths of theology into a larger and more complete whole. The parts of traditional theology that did not fit with modern philosophy and science would need to be revised in order to save the rationality of the Christian faith. Like most liberals, Bowne was a real believer in intellectual and cultural progress.

### ***Philosophy as Partner and Colleague***

Each of these models has something to teach us. Luther is right that theology must maintain its ultimate allegiance to special divine revelation, that is, to Jesus Christ and the word of God. To give these up is to cease being *Christian* theology. At the same time, both Anselm and Aquinas are surely right that theology seeks out philosophy as its colleague and helper. Theology needs the clarity and rationality of philosophy and has always used philosophy as a tool for expounding and defending the Christian faith. Finally, the Calvinist tradition makes an important point: Christian faith can provide a basis or perspective from which we do philosophy. But we cannot accept the notion of Bowne, that theology must be based upon (and thus finally absorbed by) the right kind of philosophy. Theology and philosophy can cooperate and be partners only when each maintains its own proper autonomy as a distinct tradition of inquiry. This cautionary tale is our most important lesson from the liberal experiment.

Philosophy and theology are colleagues together in the creation of a Christian worldview (or, better, worldviews, for many different ones have been constructed over the millennia). In this task they work with all the academic disciplines, as understood by Christian scholarship. Neither should dominate or be subservient to the other. In its own domain, with respect to its own goals for understanding and seeking the truth, each is autonomous. Within this autonomy, however, there can and should be partnership. This partnership has been fruitful, especially for theology. The following examples should illuminate the central claim here, that theology and philosophy can and should be colleagues.

*Critical dialogue.* Philosophers have been critical of Christianity for centuries and no doubt will continue to be so. There is much to be learned here about problems in the church, in our ethics, and in our understanding of the faith. Philosophy provides Christians with a valuable service when it is critical of Christianity. More intellectuals in the church should be listening.

*Understanding culture and diverse viewpoints.* The gospel is proclaimed and lived in a variety of cultures all over the globe. Philosophy gives expression to the deepest insights, questions, struggles, and values of human experience. The study of philosophies in various cultures can be a rich source for understanding differing cultures and worldviews, including one's own.

*Standards of reason and logic.* One task of philosophy is to study good reasoning in general, that is, formal and informal logic. Like other academic disciplines, theology seeks clarity and truth, using human reason to come to conclusions about its central doctrines. Philosophy can assist theology in this quest, especially if we are careful and humble about our arguments and conclusions.

*Developing theological concepts and theories.* All Christian theologians depend upon key philosophical concepts in order to develop their theories. Like other academic disciplines, theology draws upon paradigms, which include philosophical understanding. Theology must use philosophical ideas, but critically. The criterion of this critique is the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. No system of philosophy, no metaphysical analysis, can be accepted as the only proper Christian view. Theology uses philosophy, but it should do so with a light touch, always seeking to ground itself in divine revelation rather than merely human wisdom.

*Explaining and defending the Christian faith on philosophical grounds.* Philosophy is obviously necessary in areas of thought that combine theology and philosophy. Three of them are *apologetics*, which is the rational defense of the Christian faith; *philosophy of religion*, which is a branch of philosophy concerned with any and all religions; and *philosophical theology*, which explores philosophical issues within a particular theology. Thus a Christian philosophical theology is philosophy of religion applied to Christian theology. Each of these areas has a slightly different approach and purpose, but they are also quite similar. Whatever name we wish to use, the point is that these are necessarily interdisciplinary tasks. Explaining and defending the Christian faith on philosophical grounds will always draw from both philosophy and theology.

*Constructing a Christian worldview.* The task of constructing a Christian worldview belongs to all the disciplines of the university, as interpreted through Christian scholarship. Philosophy and theology have important roles to play, but not the only ones. Systematic theology (Christian doc-

trine) does not of itself create a Christian worldview. In fact, theology cannot do its task without the help of the other disciplines, founded and interpreted by the community of Christian scholarship.

The academic discipline of Christian theology seeks to know and love God, as revealed in Christ and the Christian scriptures. Philosophy proves to be a very helpful dialogue partner and colleague in this process. Especially important is conversation with philosophers who are Christian scholars. Both academic disciplines represent noble communities and traditions that seek after the truth. Problems arise in this collegiality, however, when one partner seeks to control the other. Theology should not seek to control philosophy's quest for truth or prejudice its conclusions for or against the faith.<sup>9</sup> Individual philosophers may well begin with Christian faith, but the discipline of philosophy as a community of rationality will question all authority, including the authority of Jesus Christ. For this reason theology can never become philosophy, and philosophers as a community (Christian and non-Christian) must always be free to question faith. In theology, Jesus Christ alone is Lord; but Jesus is also the servant. The word of God made flesh is our friend and not only our master. He who is the author of all truth and the creative ground of freedom desires true freedom of inquiry for all people. The triune God is eternal love. Eternity can afford to be patient with the academy.

Theology and philosophy can and should be colleagues. They can work together to help us create Christian worldviews, but neither discipline should simply absorb the other, nor do their methods and results become one in the long run. A right understanding of the independence and partnership of both disciplines can go a long way in helping us seek the truth.

## THE PROBLEM OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

Having argued that theology and philosophy are mutually beneficial traditions of inquiry, we proceed to a concrete example—natural theology—to demonstrate and illuminate the points just made. Natural theology, its nature and legitimacy, has been a lively question since the theologian Karl Barth attacked this field. But the objections of Barth and the philosopher Alvin Plantinga can be overcome when we pay

9. As George Marsden rightly notes, "No matter what commitments one brings into one's academic work, one would have to argue for one's scholarly interpretations on the same sorts of publicly accessible grounds that are widely accepted in the academy" (*Outrageous Idea*, 52).

careful attention to the differences between the two research programs of philosophy and theology.<sup>10</sup>

Among Christian theologians today, natural theology has fallen on hard times. We are told that natural theology is bad for us: it leads to atheism, to a reduction or rejection of the Christian God, or to an abandonment of the Christian gospel.<sup>11</sup> The term “natural theology” (*theologia naturalis*) is highly ambiguous, especially in the hands of its critics. Even a proponent of natural theology such as James Barr can use the term in so many ways that it becomes difficult to follow his argument.<sup>12</sup> Two senses of the term *theologia naturalis* are particularly important: natural theology in the strict sense, and a theology of nature.<sup>13</sup> Distinguishing between these two is important for a clear understanding of the current debate surrounding natural theology.

One simple sense of “natural theology” refers to philosophical arguments concerning the existence and nature of a god. These appeal, like all philosophy, to general characteristics of our world (“nature”) and are based upon human reason. The word “god” is lowercase here because it is not necessarily the Western God that is in view. The character of this god is also open to philosophical reflection and critique. Alvin Plantinga is thus overly narrow in defining natural theology as “the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God.”<sup>14</sup> Philosophy of religion is rightly concerned not only with the existence of god but also with the nature of this god, as known through philosophical inquiry. Here Stephen Davis and Richard Swinburne are on firmer ground; both of these natural theologians provide philosophical arguments about the nature and existence of god.<sup>15</sup>

10. The arguments made here are developed in more detail in Alan G. Padgett, “Theologia Naturalis,” *Faith and Philosophy* 21/4 (October 2004): 493–502.

11. See, e.g., Karl Barth, “No!” in E. Brunner and K. Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (1946; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002); Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

12. James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 1–7.

13. For a different taxonomy, see George L. Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 2003), 8–25. Murphy puts together into one category, “dependent natural theology,” what I wish to distinguish as natural theology versus a theology of nature.

14. See Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 63. See, more recently, Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 171n, 179n.

15. See Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); *The Existence of God*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); *God, Reason, and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

Natural theology, thus understood, is a part of philosophy. It appeals to a knowledge of god derived from reason and nature and makes no central appeal to special revelation. For the purposes of clarity in discussing the nature and province of natural theology, let us use the term "natural theology" in this strict sense to denote an aspect of the philosophy of religion. So when William Alston defines natural theology as "the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs," we need to understand that his definition of natural theology places it with the discipline of philosophy: natural theology thus understood is a *philosophical* enterprise.<sup>16</sup>

"Theology of nature," on the other hand, here designates an essential aspect of Christian doctrine. George Hendry places this question at the heart of such a theology of nature: "What is the place, meaning, and purpose of the world of nature in the overall plan of God in creation and redemption?"<sup>17</sup> *Theologia naturalis* understood as a theology of nature is part of a Christian doctrine of creation, grounded in the revelation of God in Scripture and supremely in Jesus Christ. Because the doctrine of creation is an essential part of the task of Christian doctrine, a theology of nature is essential to Christian doctrine rightly understood. Even Karl Barth developed a doctrine of creation at great length in his *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to distinguish these two senses of *theologia naturalis* (natural theology in the strict sense and a theology of nature) in order to appreciate the debates surrounding natural theology today. For example, when James Barr states (in criticism of Karl Barth) that "the natural theology of the Bible is built into the revelational and salvific material [in Scripture]," we can only accept this conclusion when we realize that Barr means a theology of nature, and not natural theology in the strict sense.<sup>19</sup> Barr is noting that the Bible's theology of nature is built into the biblical witness concerning human salvation and divine revelation. Another example of this tendency to confuse natural theology and a theology of nature comes from the recent work of Alister McGrath. In defending the purpose and place of natural theology for Christian doctrine today, McGrath claims that "it is perfectly possible to frame a natural theology in such a manner that it does not involve such an in-

16. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 289.

17. G. S. Hendry, *Theology of Nature* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 11.

18. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 4 vols. in 13 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936–1975). Volume 3 is *The Doctrine of Creation*.

19. Barr, *Biblical Faith*, 190n; his emphasis.

tention to prove God's existence."<sup>20</sup> When McGrath goes on to describe such a natural theology, it becomes clear he is describing a theology of nature, not natural theology in our sense.

These different senses of *theologia naturalis* arise from their placement in different disciplines. As mentioned, it is impossible to give a generally accepted definition of either philosophy or Christian doctrine. Yet we can insist that they are not the same academic discipline without having a universally accepted or necessary definition of either. As argued above, all the disciplines of academia (including philosophy and theology) are best understood in the light of Christ as distinct but interconnected and equally important colleagues, whose task is the development of a Christian worldview for the church today. Each discipline can, under certain circumstances, rationally influence the other, but each remains distinct with respect to its main goals and methods of inquiry. Thus, to understand the character and nature of *theologia naturalis*, we need to grasp its placement in the distinct academic disciplines of philosophy and Christian doctrine.

### ***Objections to Natural Theology: Plantinga and Barth***

As this collection of contributions demonstrates, Christian philosophy has an important role to play in the development of a Christian worldview for our times. Most Christian intellectuals are rightly interested in the rational assessment of religious claims, the relationship between faith and reason, and the extent to which reasons can be given for our Christian faith. Philosophers of religion investigate all of these questions, and natural theology (as part of a philosophy of religion) seems to be essential to these investigations. Yet even when we pay attention to the different senses of *theologia naturalis* as natural theology in the strict sense (in philosophy) and a theology of nature (in Christian doctrine), there are still scholars who will object to the aims and methods of natural theology in philosophy of religion. Although we cannot here examine all such criticisms, two Reformed thinkers are particularly prominent: Plantinga and Barth. We will focus upon their objections.

Plantinga's objections to natural theology are spelled out in several essays. In a central paper, "Reason and Belief in God," his major objection to natural theology is that it is a form of evidentialism and rationalism—that is, classical foundationalism. The natural theologian appears to hold that belief in God is not epistemically adequate without evidence and argument. In "rejecting natural theology," Plantinga asserts that

20. Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, vol. 1, *Nature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 266.

“the propriety or rightness of belief in God in no way depends upon the success or availability of the sort of theistic arguments that form the natural theologian’s stock in trade.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, Plantinga’s main objection to natural theology is the apparent assumption that faith needs evidence and argument in order to be rationally acceptable or philosophically legitimate.

I agree with Plantinga that belief in God can be and often is perfectly legitimate and proper without any philosophical arguments. In other words, Christian faith does not depend upon the practice of philosophy (specifically natural theology) but rather upon more direct, immediate, and spiritual sources of the knowledge of God. Nevertheless, as a specialty within philosophy of religion, natural theology will indeed be based upon reason, nature, evidence, and argument. This is because natural theology, as a philosophical enterprise, will use the standard methods of philosophy to achieve its aims. In his essay, Plantinga allows for this possibility, stating that “the natural theologian” may engage in philosophical debate with unbelievers but at the same time point out that “belief in God is not based upon its relation to the deliverances of reason.”<sup>22</sup> In his more recent Gifford lectures, Plantinga goes so far as to admit, “Of course it doesn’t follow [from his position] that theistic belief can’t get warrant by way of argument from other beliefs; nor does it follow that natural theology and more informal theistic argument is of no worth in the believer’s intellectual and spiritual life.”<sup>23</sup> We can see from these comments that Plantinga allows for a natural theology that is a part of philosophy but in no way provides a philosophical foundation for Christian faith or the necessary epistemic warrant for Christian belief understood in general terms. My only caution is that a natural theologian need not be a believer.

Plantinga’s objections to natural theology are not decisive. On the contrary, they help us to see that natural theology is best understood as a part of the philosophy of religion. Natural theology should not be confused with religion itself or with a doctrinal theology based upon religious faith and practice. Yet as Christian scholars interested in the development of a Christian worldview, we will want this intellectual activity (natural theology) to be grounded in Christian learning, just as we would any intellectual discipline. A Christian philosopher may well be very interested in natural theology, but he or she should not suppose that the viability and epistemic justification of Christian faith is dependent upon natural theology. On the other hand, as a philosopher, a Christian

21. Plantinga, “Reason and Belief,” 72.

22. *Ibid.*, 71.

23. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 179n.



natural theologian will need to give some reason and evidence for his or her beliefs and conclusions. Here Richard Swinburne, perhaps the world's leading natural theologian, has a point. Rational belief *within the discipline of philosophy* (including rational religious belief) requires rational explication and explanation, including some evidence and argument, even if those beliefs are not *based upon* evidence and argument.<sup>24</sup> Plantinga, after all, does give many *arguments* for the beliefs he accepts in philosophy of religion. He provides logical explication and explanation of them as well. I am not here talking about a return to classical foundationalism but about the kind of things philosophers do in the normal practice of their research program.

Objections of a different type to natural theology come from the work of Karl Barth. First we need to understand Barth's definition of *theologia naturalis*, and then we can begin to grasp the heart of his objection. In his famous debate with Brunner, Barth defined natural theology as

every (positive or negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, i.e., to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ, and whose method therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture.<sup>25</sup>

Here Barth's notion of *theologia naturalis* is quite different from either of the senses developed in this essay. Natural theology as he uses the term is first of all a kind of theology, that is, a type of Christian doctrine that seeks "to interpret divine revelation." Second, it is not so much an argument or philosophical inquiry as the "formulation of a system," that is, a systematic theology. Barth's objection to natural theology, then, is his objection to any so-called Christian theology or dogmatics that is done independent of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, made known in the witness of the Old and New Testaments, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the witness of the church. Again, in his *Göttingen Dogmatics*, Barth argues that "if God does not speak, then it is not God that we hear in those supposed voices of God but a voice from this world, from this unredeemed world, from the contradiction of our existence." For this reason he seeks to "take the one part of the material world that has been mentioned by what is called natural theology and include it at once in the true Christian theology that is called supernatural, that is, in revelation."<sup>26</sup>

24. See Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981). What Swinburne calls "belief" in this book I interpret as *rational* belief.

25. Barth, "No!" 74.

26. Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 92.

Barth's objection to natural theology, then, is an objection to any Christian doctrine (systematic theology) that is not based primarily and essentially on special, supernatural revelation, that is, the word of God. Natural theology denotes, for him, "a theology which makes a great show of guaranteeing the knowability of God apart from grace and therefore from faith."<sup>27</sup> For Barth, the words "natural theology" point to the attempt of sinful, disobedient, and arrogant "natural man" to control god, to put the knowledge of god at our own disposal, and therefore to "know" a false god.<sup>28</sup> For this reason Barth objects to any natural theology that pretends to be a philosophical foundation for faith in the Christian God, "so that the establishing of his knowability in the natural sphere, in the sphere of the human life-endeavour, will in fact mean a preparation for the establishing of His knowability in His revelation."<sup>29</sup> Barth objects to any theology that seeks to control, found, or guarantee the word of God.

Barth, and Luther before him, have powerful truths to declare about the pretensions of human reason and the ability of sin to turn even our best and highest cultural expressions into evil, idolatry, and death. Even so, does this mean that any and all types of *theologia naturalis* are minions of Satan? There is plenty of room in Barth's theological method for a theology of nature, as he himself develops later in *Church Dogmatics*. But by the term "natural theology," Barth always means something in opposition to the knowledge of God found in God's own revelation in Jesus Christ. For Barth, natural theology is liberal or modernist Christian theology, of the type exemplified by Borden Parker Bowne.

Barth did not object to a theology of nature grounded in the word of God, which he developed in his doctrine of creation. But what about the philosophical attempt to know God; that is, what about natural theology in our strict sense, as a discipline of philosophy of religion? Here Barth seems to shout once again, *Nein!*<sup>30</sup> What he fails to consider seriously is the idea that there might well be a *Christian philosophy* that does not confuse the God of Abraham and Sarah with the god of the philosophers.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Søren Kierkegaard (whom Barth often quotes and/or borrows from) should be understood exactly as such a Christian philosopher.

27. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2/1:85.

28. See *ibid.*, 86–87.

29. *Ibid.*, 89.

30. *Nein!* is the German title for the booklet Karl Barth wrote against Brunner; the English translation is Barth, "No!"

31. See, e.g., Karl Barth's rejection of a Christian worldview, based upon his fallacious equation of Christian learning with the triumph of Christendom, in *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 37–38.

Though rejecting the idea of a Christian philosophy in explicit terms, in an important essay, "The First Commandment as an Axiom for Theology," Barth comes close to considering such a possibility. Here he considers what it would mean to add the little word "and" to revelation so as to include other sources of truth in theology, for example, revelation *and* reason.<sup>32</sup> In this essay, dedicated to avoiding idolatry in Christian theology, Barth gives three cautions to those who would add "and" to revelation, as a basis for the knowledge of God. First, we must speak of revelation "with a notably heightened seriousness and interest, and by speaking of that other criterion only secondarily and for the sake of revelation" (p. 73). Second (and this sounds very much like what I am calling Christian scholarship), theology expresses its commitment to the first commandment by "interpreting those other things according to revelation and not the other way around" (74). Third, theology must permit "no possibility . . . of intermixing, exchanging, or identifying the two concepts in this relation" (75). All these cautions are well taken. Yet *pace* Barth, there is plenty of room here for a Christian philosophy that takes Christian faith and revelation seriously but nevertheless engages in philosophy *as philosophy* (not exchanging one for the other or mixing them up). Indeed, it is only by not mixing up the disciplines of philosophy and theology that we can avoid the objections of both Barth and Plantinga to *theologia naturalis*.

To avoid the Barthian objection, natural theology must keep its place within a strictly philosophical domain. It cannot and should not become a kind of substitute for revelation—a more acceptable means (to the arrogance of Enlightenment rationalism) of the knowledge of God, a means independent of, and laying the foundations for, the word of God. That humans can know God through nature, reason, and philosophy is not in question. Whether such a god is Yahweh or Baal is the real theological point of Barth's objection. By rejecting the Enlightenment call to provide a sure, rational foundation for faith, natural theology can avoid this objection.

Second, though a part of Christian scholarship and therefore willing to own its Christian presuppositions without apology, a Christian natural theology should do its work according to the highest and most rigorous philosophical standards, in dialogue and debate with other philosophers in a pluralistic academy. That is, natural theology should maintain itself as good philosophy and not short-circuit philosophical debate by appeals to special revelation, religious faith, or other particularities of the

32. Karl Barth, "The First Commandment as an Axiom for Theology," in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth*, ed. H. M. Rumscheidt (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1986).

Christian religion as a means of settling arguments. The best natural theologians already practice their art in just this manner.

I have proposed that we accept two distinct senses of *theologia naturalis*: natural theology in the strict sense (in philosophy) and a theology of nature (in Christian doctrine). By paying attention to these differences, we can overcome the objections to natural theology brought by Plantinga and Barth. Thus understood, natural theology continues to have an essential role to play in both Christian philosophy and Christian doctrine. This provides a concrete example of my main point: theology and philosophy are distinct traditions of inquiry, yet they should work together at many levels. Indeed we can go so far as to claim that the collegiality of theology and philosophy depends upon their being distinct methods and traditions of academic study.

### *Some Objections Considered*

Several proponents of natural theology have argued that Christian doctrine itself should include natural theology;<sup>33</sup> in other words, Christian doctrine must always include philosophy as part of its work. I have argued that natural theology should keep its place in philosophy instead. Does this mean philosophy has no place in theology? By no means. Christian doctrine uses the methods of many other disciplines, including rhetoric, literature, history, philology, and philosophy. But since natural theology eschews any basis in special revelation and depends upon broadly philosophical bases for its arguments, its disciplinary home is philosophy and not doctrinal theology. Christian doctrine should listen to and engage natural theology, but theologians must test the conclusions of natural theology according to the standards of truth and reason found within Christian doctrine.

Another objection might be that theology and philosophy are being treated as if their aims, boundaries, and methods were fixed for all time. Such is not the case. Some attention to real differences among the current mix of disciplines within the flux of academia is also important. Take politics as an analogy. The differences between political entities such as nations, states, counties, and cities are equally open to revision, historical change, and social construction. But knowing the difference between the United States and Canada, or Delhi and Delphi, is still important. The fact that things are in flux does not imply that all differences and distinctions are irrelevant. For our purposes, it is best

33. One example would be the somewhat neglected work of Richard Rice, *Reason and the Contours of Faith* (Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1991), especially the two chapters on natural theology.

that the distinction between philosophy and doctrinal theology be clarified. Other chapters in this book develop their similarities and provide fruitful topics for interdisciplinary dialogue.

One final objection: it might seem that I am seeking to seal off Christian doctrine from intellectual attack or at least from the rigor of philosophical argument and public debate. But again, such is not the case. Christian doctrine does its work in public and is open to public scrutiny. Its arguments, evidence, and rationality are open for all to examine. This does not imply that we must give up our belief in special revelation as the heart and soul of Christian doctrine. For the aim of Christian doctrine is to know and love God—not just any god but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—and to know other things in relation to the blessed Trinity. To say that Christian doctrine is rational and public does not imply that Christian doctrine should be done as if the Father had not spoken in his word, as if Jesus Christ were not the incarnation of the living Logos, and as if the Spirit had not inspired the prophets and apostles in their written witness. Such a denial of basic Christian commitment would not only alter but also undermine the two-thousand-year tradition of inquiry that is Christian doctrine.

We are now in a better position to answer Tertullian's question: what concord is there between philosophy and theology? The answer we have found, *pace* Tertullian, is a rich and fruitful collegiality between two distinct communities and traditions of rational inquiry. Both theology and philosophy seek the truth, but as academic disciplines their methods and interests differ. Understanding their differences as academic disciplines can open the way to new avenues for cooperation and dialogue.