

ON SYSTEMATIC PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

Systematic philosophical theologies are rare—at least on the contemporary scene. 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.¹ 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. Richard Swinburne’s tetralogy in philosophical theology, coupled with his trilogy in natural theology, is doubtless the preeminent example of systematic philosophical theology in the analytic tradition.² Now Oliver Crisp has joined other analytic philosophical theologians in taking steps “toward a systematic theology,” even if the scope of such a project makes the goal elusive.³ But what, exactly, is systematic philosophical theology, and how does it relate to the various other theological and philosophical disciplines?

Systematic Theology

To begin with systematic theology, the expression “systematic theology,” like “history” or “philosophy,” has various referents. If we think of systematic theology as an academic discipline or task, we may ask after 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 way in which the field is commonly pursued by its practitioners.⁴ 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

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1994-97).

² Swinburne’s trilogy in natural theology includes *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); *The Existence of God*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), and *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); while his tetralogy comprises *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

³ Oliver D. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine: Toward a Systematic Theology* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2019).

⁴ See Eleonore Stump, “Athens and Jerusalem: The Relationship of Philosophy and Theology,” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 1/1(2013): 46-7; 10.12978/jat.2013-1.041104181915a, who uses “doctrinal” rather than “definitional” to draw the distinction.

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, 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 discipline which, however worthy, just is not systematic theology, for example, biblical 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.⁵ 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 as sources of knowledge.
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 interest is in Christian systematic theology.

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

⁵ Thomas Aquinas *Summa theologiae* 1.1.7. Interestingly, Thomas Flint and Michael 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], p. 1).

known as dogmatic theology or dogmatics in German theology.⁶ For German 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,⁷ 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.⁸ 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.”⁹

Fundamental Theology and Apologetics

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

⁶ See, e.g., the popular handbook by Horst Georg Pöhlman, *Abriss der Dogmatik*, 3rd rev. ed. (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1980), who defines dogmatics as the ecclesiastical science of God that summarizes the biblical message and reformulates it anew for our time (p. 36). Pöhlman emphasizes the unavoidability of philosophy for dogmatics (pp. 28-29).

⁷ Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 4.

⁸ Sometimes such confessional theology is called “symbolics” (Herman Bavink, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003], 1:54, 60).

⁹ 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, 1971-78); Friedrich Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studium der Dogmengeschichte*, 6th ed., ed. K. 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). *N.B.* 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*, p. 17; cf. p. 18).

every generation. This serves to raise the question of systematic theology's relationship to fundamental theology and apologetics.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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 the efforts of 18th century Protestant and Anglican apologists to refute Enlightenment Deists, agnostics, and atheists. 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.

¹⁰ Crisp *et al.* are silent 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 Pater Aureoli (Oliver D. Crisp, James M. Arcadi, and Jordan Wessling, *The Nature and Promise of Analytic Theology* [Leiden: Brill, 2019], pp. 20-33).

¹¹ Gerald O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology: Toward a New Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 15-16.

In contrast to apologetics and fundamental theology, systematic theology (dogmatics) should not be burdened with the responsibility of positively proving the truth of its doctrinal assertions, even to the degree of being more probable than not.¹² 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 reason, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity (*Summa theologiae* 1.1.1). 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. Insofar as systematic theology seeks to formulate and defend coherent statements of Christian doctrine, it does overlap 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.

The systematic theologian or dogmatician is properly concerned with formulating the doctrinal content of the Christian faith, not with establishing the truth of its doctrinal content.¹³ Thus he may expound the doctrinal content of the Christian faith and even defend its inner coherence without any presupposition of its truth. 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.

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 a theological worldview. In virtually every topic area it

¹² I cannot therefore agree with Pannenberg in seeing "the truth of Christian doctrine as the theme of systematic theology" (Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1: 1). In Pannenberg's view, as a result of the loss of the authority of Scripture and Church doctrine, the weight of the question as to the truth of Christian doctrine "has shifted over entirely to dogmatics" (1: 8). Pannenberg's claim 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 (1: 48).

¹³ Indeed, he may even appeal to Scripture as a source of information concerning Christian doctrine without presupposing its truth. 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.

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. 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.¹⁴ In fact, analytic philosophy can be surprisingly helpful to biblical theologians in virtue of its emphasis on conceptual clarification.¹⁵ At the same time, it must be said that one of the greatest weaknesses of contemporary Christian philosophers is their ignorance of biblical theology. Far too often, conclusions about some matter, for example, the nature of faith or of atonement, are based upon secular models and then applied uncritically to theology, resulting in misunderstanding and distortion. A concerted effort needs to be made by philosophical theologians to study and understand the Scriptures in their original languages prior to their formulation of Christian doctrine using the tools of philosophical analysis. Systematic theologians need to draw upon the work of biblical theologians as well as that of historical theologians as part of their resources for the enunciation of a biblically and philosophically adequate Christian worldview.

I am firmly convinced that analytic philosophy ought to be the principal philosophy employed in doing systematic philosophical theology. Continental philosophy is much too woolly and wild to be of significant help in the formulation and defense of coherent Christian doctrine, and

¹⁴ Given this understanding, Wayne Grudem's popular *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994) is not really a systematic theology at all, but rather a 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" (p. 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" (p. 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" (p. 23).

¹⁵ One may enthusiastically concur with Trent Dougherty's call for "analytic biblical theology," i.e., "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: Conceptions, Continuations, and Challenges*, ed. J. Aaron Simmons [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019], p. 182).

theologians' reliance on it has been to the detriment of their theology.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ It prizes clarity of definition, conceptual analysis, clear formulation of premises and arguments, and logical validity and coherence.¹⁸ As Michael Rea observes, these seem to be “fairly commonsensical virtues” that we all recognize.¹⁹ Indeed; and the intellectual virtues of the analytic method of theorizing are ignored at our peril.

¹⁶ For particularly strong statements of this point see Randal Rauser, “Theology as a Bull Session,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 83; William J. Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 55-58.

¹⁷ See A. P. Martinich and David Sosa, eds., *A Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 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.”

¹⁸ See the nice characterization of analytic philosophizing by Max Baker-Hyatt, “Analytic Theology and Analytic Philosophy of Religion: What’s the Difference?” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4 (May 2016), pp. 348-9, 10.12978/jat.2016-4.120023010007a. Crisp suggests that analytic theology does inherit from analytic philosophy such substantive commitments as (1) the presumption that there is some theological truth of the matter and that this truth can be ascertained and understood and (2) an instrumental use of reason (Oliver D. Crisp, “On Analytic Theology,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 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. also 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*, p. 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.

As a corrective to William Abraham's definition of analytic theology as "systematic theology attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy,"²⁰ Crisp rightly points out that analytic theology may not always be systematic theology.²¹ For example, someone could do analytic natural theology, prescinding from the resources of divine revelation. 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."²² This characterization is, however, somewhat 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.

Systematic theology done well, then, will be philosophical theology. The only difference between the two will be the range of topics dealt with. Systematic theology will be philosophical theology applied to the full theological curriculum.

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 and is 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."²³

¹⁹ Michael C. Rea, "Introduction," in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 6.

²⁰ Abraham, "Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology," p. 59.

²¹ Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 17.

²² Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 32; cf. Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, p. 53.

²³ Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 3.

As a *Wissenschaft* analytic theology is clearly not, *pace* Crisp *et al.*, also an intellectual subculture with its own literature, jargon, social networks, and affiliated substantive commitments.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶

So 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, as a *Wissenschaft*, the proximate purpose of theology is to lay out in an organized, coherent way Christian truth claims.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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. As Michael Rea has intimated, 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 involves clarifying, systematizing, and

²⁴ Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, pp. 3, 10-13.

²⁵ Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, pp. 10, 11, 15).

²⁶ Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, p. 15.

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Cf. the classic Protestant distinction between the *finis theologiae principalis: glorificatio dei* and the *finis theologiae intermedius: informatio hominem ad salute*. The proximate purpose is to provide information, i.e., propositional truth.

²⁸ As claimed by Stump, “Athens and Jerusalem,” p. 53.

model building—precisely the sort of project that analytic philosophers are engaged in.”²⁹ Systematic theology is, in short, a science, not a spiritual discipline.

Philosophy of Religion

We come now to the important question of the relation of systematic philosophical theology to philosophy of religion. 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 focus here is entirely on philosophy of religion as a sub-discipline of philosophy. Our question is made easier by that fact that we are interested, not in philosophy of religion in general, but in the philosophy of the *Christian* religion, with which we are familiar. 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. Similarly, Christian theology bristles with philosophical questions in virtually every area it touches, preeminently the doctrine of God. By philosophy of the Christian religion, then, one means philosophical reflection on the truth claims of Christian theology.

The philosophy of the Christian religion is therefore coextensive with Christian systematic theology. The subject matter is necessarily the same. Given further that systematic theology is necessarily philosophical theology, it would therefore seem that systematic theology and the philosophy of the Christian religion are in fact the same thing. If they are to be differentiated, it will not be on the basis of their subject matter but on the basis of their method.

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.

In the older textbooks of philosophy of religion one finds the same distinction drawn between philosophy of religion and theology of various sorts.³⁰ On this interpretation, 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, could write, “The philosophy of religion. . . is

²⁹ Rea, “Introduction,” p. 19.

³⁰ E.g., Frederick Ferré, *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1967), p. 10.

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 a given religion and to put them into systematic order, without ever raising the ultimate question of their truth.”³¹ According to this surprising characterization, philosophy never proceeds from a religious standpoint, and theology never explores the basis of its own truth claims.

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 identifying philosophy and theology. On the contrary, we have learned to be skeptical of the whole Enlightenment view that seemed to support it.”³² Philosophers working in meta-epistemology in the late 20th 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.”³³

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

³¹ *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2d ed., ed. Donald M. Borchert, s.v. “Philosophy of Religion, Problems of,” by William P. Alston (1967) (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006).

³² Stump, “Athens and Jerusalem,” p. 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*, p. 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. E.g., 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,” p. 356; cf. Andrew Chignell, “‘As Kant Has Shown’: Analytic Theology and the Critical Philosophy,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], p. 119).

³³ 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], p. 160.

W.V. O. Quine called “naturalized epistemology” or “naturalism” for short.³⁴ 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.”³⁵ In contrast to classical foundationalism, Quine’s naturalized epistemology shunned what he called “first philosophy,” any attempt to justify the deliverances of the sciences.³⁶ There should be no attempt to ground the natural sciences; rather this is where we begin our philosophizing. So although Quine abandoned classical foundationalism in taking natural science to be a basic source of knowledge, he did not include among our basic sources of knowledge non-natural or even non-scientific sources.

The relevant aspect of naturalized epistemology for theistic beliefs, then, is its restriction of our basic sources of knowledge to the sciences. 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, that are required by the truth of our best scientific theories may be posited. 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.”³⁷ 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.

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, 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

³⁴ W. V. Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 69-90.

³⁵ W. V. Quine, “Things and their Place in Theories,” in idem, *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 21.

³⁶ 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*, p. 67).

³⁷ W. V. Quine, “Naturalism; or, Living within One’s Means,” *Dialectica* 49 (1995): 252.

deal of contemporary philosophy. His theological arguments or objections will be treated dismissively as emanating from what has been called an “alienated epistemology.”³⁸ But as Alvin Plantinga has emphasized,³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ But then naturalism’s restrictive epistemological stance is either justified extra-scientifically, which makes naturalism self-defeating, or else simply unjustified.

Rea argues that naturalism must be regarded as unjustified.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

³⁸ For this appellation, see John P. Burgess and Gideon Rosen, *A Subject with No Object* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 205.

³⁹ Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984): 253-71.

⁴⁰ 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), pp. 3-23.

⁴¹ Michael C. Rea, *World without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 63-67; cf. pp. 1-7.

⁴² Rea, *World without Design*, p. 72.

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 philosopher, 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.

Our present situation, Wolterstorff reflects, is thus one of extraordinary epistemological pluralism.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ Philosophy is now widely assumed by analytic philosophers to be a dialogical pluralist enterprise.⁴⁵ 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.

So 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

⁴³ Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible,” p. 161.

⁴⁴ Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible,” p. 163. Cf. John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 129-80.

⁴⁵ Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible,” p. 166. Moreover, Christian philosophy itself is a pluralistic enterprise, as emphasized by Aaron Simmons, “Introduction: Why This? Why Now?” in *Christian Philosophy: Conceptions, Continuations, and Challenges*, ed. J. Aaron Simmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 1-17. None of the essayists in Simmons’ volume, including non-Christian philosophers, claims that there is and can be no such thing as Christian philosophy.

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*.⁴⁶

What Paul Tillich once dismissed as a dream has now become a reality.⁴⁷

Concluding Remarks

It is very difficult to discern any difference in principle between the Christian philosopher of religion and the Christian systematic theologian. 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 about whether the claims of religion are true and/or rational."⁴⁸ 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)."⁴⁹

There is no doubt that such an interest does characterize philosophy of religion. I have argued, on the other hand, that the systematic theologian need not take up the task of positive Christian apologetics. This difference with regard to the formulation and defense of positive arguments for theistic beliefs may serve to distinguish Christian philosophy of religion from Christian systematic theology. But the line of demarcation is not fixed and impassable. Many philosophers

⁴⁶ Thomas Flint, "Introduction," in *Christian Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), p. ix.

⁴⁷ Crisp, Arcadi, and Wessling, *Nature and Promise*, p. 67; contrast Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1. 27.

⁴⁸ David Shatz, *Philosophy and Faith: A Philosophy of Religion Reader* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p. xiv.

⁴⁹ Shatz, *Philosophy and Faith*, pp. xiv-xv.

of religion have no interest in natural theology but are occupied, for example, with evaluative, philosophical analysis of key theological concepts, while medieval systematic theologies like Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* and Scotus' *Ordinatio* included natural theology, and nothing prevents the contemporary systematic theologian from discussing arguments for God's existence should he wish. Neither the philosopher of religion nor the systematic theologian is required to assess the arguments, and neither is prohibited. In sum, 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."⁵⁰ The situation has so changed today that the philosopher, if not the clergyman, may certainly keep his job.

⁵⁰ H.H. Price, "Faith and Belief," in John Hick, ed., *Faith and the Philosophers* (London: Macmillan, 1964), p. 3.