

Natural Science within Public Christian Philosophy and Public Systematic Theology

Ted Peters

ABSTRACT Christian philosophy provides the form and systematic theology the substance when the church turns its intellectual face toward the wider public. This united front is vital in the context of a global competition between worldviews, where naturalism in the form of aggressive scientism has declared war on all things religious. Through discourse clarification the philosopher should distinguish between genuine science and the naturalistic reductionism that attempts to co-opt it; and through worldview construction the theologian should then demonstrate how nature viewed by science belongs within a picture where all reality is oriented toward the one God of grace. In the battle between competing explanations of reality, the public Christian philosopher along with the public systematic theologian should offer a worldview with greater explanatory adequacy.

KEYWORDS Christian philosophy; discourse clarification; explanatory; John Paul II; Plantinga, Alvin; public systematic theology; worldview construction

When the intellectual Pendolino pulls out of Warsaw station, the first coach will be occupied by Christian philosophers racing toward the twenty-first century. The remaining coaches of the Inter-City Express will be occupied by systematic theologians, resting a great deal of baggage on their laps. When they arrive at their common destination, the philosophers will need what the theologians unpack from their luggage. Or, to change metaphors, Christian philosophy provides the form and systematic theology the substance when the church turns its intellectual face toward the wider public.

INTRODUCTION

What is the mission of Christian philosophy? Does it serve only the believers within the church whose faith seeks growth in understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*)? Or, does it serve the wider culture by expanding and deepening global understanding? Do faith and reason sit side-by-side like marbles in a bag without influencing each other? Or, do they mix and blend like gin and dry vermouth to make a *tertium quid*, a Martini?

The answer to these queries hinges in part on whether faith constitutes an independent form of knowing, or at least an independent factor that conditions human knowing in general. Some Christian philosophers affirm that faith contributes special knowledge. But whether this is the case or not, what is more important is that faith modifies if not enriches natural or secular knowledge. Without faith in the God revealed in Holy Scripture, the human mind simply cannot know certain things about reality. Truth apart from truth-in-God is less than the truth.

When we ask about the sources for systematic theology, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral lists four: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.¹ The third source, reason, includes philosophy along with science. Doctrinal theology incorporates into its own knowledge-construction what we learn from philosophers and laboratory scientists. So, what might the Christian philosopher add that we do not already find in the work of the systematic theologian? If the systematic theologian lazily skips over the relevance of philosophical and scientific knowledge for doctrinal construction, the Christian philosopher is there to blow the whistle, sound the horn, and shout, "foul!" In the event that the systematic theologian is deaf to this warning and proceeds to ignore the philosopher's

1. This set of four theological sources—scripture, tradition, reason and experience—is known as the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*. "Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason." (Gunter et al. 1997, 9)

admonition, then the Christian philosopher has the right to establish an independent discipline.

In what follows we will examine the public face of both Christian philosophy and systematic theology. We will work with the assumption that the Christian philosopher along with the systematic theologian have something valuable to add to any worldview constructed solely on the basis of natural knowledge, including natural philosophy and natural science. If all the Christian philosopher can see is the back of the theologian's head because the theologian is addressing only the church, then it's time to call out, "turn around! Face outward! Say something the world needs to hear."

The Christian in Christian philosophy designates, among other things, a specific set of beliefs and claims which are organized coherently by the systematic theologian. Natural science today, like natural philosophy yesterday, is indispensable to the construction of a worldview in which everything known about reality is oriented toward the gracious God who creates and redeems. Today's systematic theologian recalls how St. Thomas Aquinas contended that the task of sacred science is to explain everything in reality in relationship to God.

But in sacred science all things are treated of under the aspect of God, either because they are God Himself, or because they are ordered to God (*sub ratione Dei*) as their beginning and end (Aquinas I-I, q. 1 a. 7).

Nature as presented by laboratory science constitutes much of the reality which needs to be understood in relation to the God of grace. Science should be internalized within doctrinal construction; and then the re-constructed doctrine should be offered to the wider public as a gift to deepen and expand previous understandings. This task makes Christian philosophy public and makes systematic theology public as well.

PUBLIC CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

Christian philosophers pay close attention to 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." I recommend that in the twenty-first century this defense be a public defense, addressed to the wider culture for the sake of the wider culture.

When in America the *The Journal of Christian Philosophy* departed the station in the 1880s, its editorial policy was vibrantly apologetic. The journal's goal was to whistle sound support for

the Theistic argument, with special reference to the multiplied proofs afforded by the progress and discoveries of Science, Natural History, Biology, and Psychology ... for the existence, character, and plan of God ... counteract all tendencies toward doubt, scepticism, unbelief, atheism, agnosticism, and the many forms of current infidelity. In short, directly to build the foundations and strengthen the defense of the Kingdom of God (Paine 1883, 338).

Accordingly, the Christian philosopher like a night train races through the dark shining the bright headlight of truth.

A century and a half later, traveling at a high rate of speed on a different rail, public philosophy takes the form of persuading society to embrace racial and economic justice. Cornel West holds a chair at Harvard Divinity School in Practical Public Philosophy. West transfers what he learned about human dignity as a Christian to the politics and economics of the democratic state. With prophetic fervor West proclaims to public ears:

We must create our own deep democratic forms of soulcraft, social movements and statecraft—forms that resist the dominant forces of privatizing, financializing and militarizing that overlook poor and working people” (West 2013).

This public philosophy does not serve the church through apologetics. Rather, it serves the world beyond the church by inspiring the pursuit of justice.

Two schools of distinctively Christian philosophy—might we designate them as the Thomistic and Reformed schools?—do not ride this public philosophy rail. Rather, both ride the same rail as *The Journal of Christian Philosophy*. But they travel at a slower speed. Christian philosophy in the Thomistic tradition is possible today, contends Pawel Tarasiewicz, only if: 1) it is not identified with the art of persuasion, as its final end lies in gaining understanding rather than being convincing, 2) it is the work of a Christian, and 3) it has the real world as its object and metaphysics as its method (Tarasiewicz 2015, 388-90). Is the slower speed due to the lack of lubrication on the apologetic wheels? Or, is the gain in “understanding” so transparently valuable that it needs no “art of persuasion” to augment it?

The apologetic wheels turn a bit more rapidly in the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga. Christian philosophy, he says, has “four different divisions: apologetics, both negative and positive, philosophical theology, Christian philosophical criticism, and constructive Christian philosophy” (Plantinga 1998, 335). The apologetic wheels spin in two directions, negatively and positively. Here’s one rotation: “Negative apologetics is

the attempt to defend Christian belief against the various sorts of attacks that have been brought against it” (Plantinga 1998, 336). Here’s the other rotation: “Positive apologetics...[is] just the effort to develop and provide theistic arguments” (Plantinga 1998, 339). I take it that this approach to apologetics drives toward a defense of Christian belief for the sake of Christian belief. What might happen should we change direction? What might happen should we switch rails and chug toward the wider public, the global culture with its chaos of competing worldviews?

The most valuable cargo should be loaded into two freight cars, I contend: the internalization of extra-theological knowledge and the augmentation of that extra-theological knowledge by distinctively Christian insight. In his evaluation of Plantinga program, Ralph McInerny loads the freight for us. First, says McInerny, “I conclude that Plantinga has provided powerful support for the view that Christian philosophy or Christian science draws attention to extra-philosophical or extra-scientific advantages that believers have over non-believers in pursuing philosophy and science” (McInerny 1993, 273). The implication for the systematic theologian is this: extra-theological sources such as philosophy and natural science are of internal value to doctrinal construction. Second,

Thus, Christian philosophizing does not result in an amalgam of faith and knowledge, but in a gain in knowledge that might never have been made without the prompting of faith (McInerny 1993, 275).

Christian insight, when apologetically formulated, buttresses and enhances knowledge of reality already obtained through natural reflection on the world. A theologically informed worldview provides greater explanatory adequacy than a worldview which deletes from its picture the God of grace. Both the public Christian philosopher and the public systematic theologian have this to offer the wider culture.

Plantinga specifically identifies two explanatorily inadequate worldviews advertised in the world marketplace of ideas, perennial naturalism and creative anti-realism. The central tenet of “perennial naturalism,” he avers, “is that there is no God and nothing beyond nature” (Plantinga 1998, 330). Then he turns to creative anti-realism, more commonly known as relativism, pluralism, or deconstructionist postmodernism. The “basic claim” here is that “there is no such thing as the way the world is, and no such thing as truth, objective truth, the same for each of us whether we know it or not. Instead, there is what is true from my perspective, in my version, in the world as I’ve structured it, what is true from your perspective, in your

version, in the world as you've structured it, and so on" (Plantinga 1998, 332).² These two are incompatible with each other, and both are incompatible with a Christian worldview, contends Plantinga.

One might easily list dozens of such worldviews bombarding the human psyche daily on social media, lighting up our cell phone and computer screens with colorful ideologies like fireworks on New Year's Eve. For the purposes of this essay, we will engage only one of these: naturalism, especially naturalism in the contemporary form of scientism.

PUBLIC SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Engagement with natural philosophy along with natural science originating outside scripture and tradition turns systematic theology into public theology. Here is my working definition:

Public theology is conceived in the church, reflected on critically in the academy, and meshed within the wider culture for the benefit of the wider culture (Peters 2018, 153).

In this case, the public theologian—especially the public systematic theologian—cultivates coherence because of its internal systematic value but also for the benefit of the wider culture plagued in the media with incoherence.

Doctrinal construction incorporating general philosophical reasoning along with empirically learned data become automatically attuned to extra-ecclesial discourse, to conversation with the wider culture. The wider culture along with the church and the academy constitute the three publics the systematic theologian should address, according to University of Chicago theologian David Tracy.³

2. It may be the case that neither objective realism nor creative anti-realism will stand alone in science. Atomic particles may occupy many locations at once—superposition—until one's measurement collapses it into just one spot. The measurement paradox in quantum physics continues to put objectivity on shaky footing. "The puzzle could mean that there is no such thing as an absolute fact, one that is as true for me as it is for you" (Musser 2020, 889).

3. "Theology is distinctive among the disciplines for speaking to and from three distinct publics: academy, church, and the general culture" (Tracy 1984, 230). If theology is rational reflection on religion, then culture outside the church remains religion asking for theological reflection. I follow Paul Tillich in pursuing a theology of culture. Theology of Culture (*Kulturtheologie*) recognizes that the religious dimension actualizes itself in every dimension of the Spirit (*Sondern das Religiöse ist aktuell in allen Provinzen des Geistigen*) (Tillich 1989, 73). Where Tillich uses "religion," Canadian phenomenologist Neal DeRoo uses "spirituality." "Culture simply is the various ways Life grows itself via living beings' relations to themselves, others, and the world. It is also, therefore, spiritual through and through, insofar as spirituality names the relation between life, living beings (vivants), and their living. Culture

An added bonus to engaging in extra-ecclesial public discourse is that the wider cultural public is already disposed toward a spiritual or religious understanding of reality, an *Anknüpfungspunkt* or connecting point that previous philosophers identified as natural revelation. We humans possess by nature a *sensus divinitatis*, an innate sense of the divine, avers John Calvin.⁴ The human species is already *homo religiosus*, surmises Karol Wojtyła: “religion is the expression of a search that goes beyond what is visible, toward an ‘unknown God’” (John Paul II 2019, 6)⁵. Both the Christian philosopher and the systematic theologian can rely upon this assumption.

In light of these observations, I believe the mission of the Christian philosopher overlaps with the mission of the systematic theologian. Internal to the church and to the academy, this shared mission addresses the need for articulating latent doubts, insuring intelligibility, and manifesting coherence. Externally, when addressing the wider public or the global culture, the Christian philosopher primarily though not exclusively exercises discourse clarification, while the systematic theologian primarily though not exclusively exercises worldview construction. Discourse clarification presents a critique of natural forms of knowledge as well as other purported revelation-based worldviews in the global public square. Christian worldview construction attempts to offer a more comprehensive and more coherent model of reality than its competitors when measured by the criterion of explanatory adequacy.

is the enactment of spirituality, even as that spirituality is inexorably shaped by the culture in which it finds itself” (DeRoo 2020, 57).

4. “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity” (Calvin 1960, Book I: Chapter III / XX:43). “Calvin holds that one can rationally accept belief in God as basic” (Plantinga 2005, 387). As mentioned, DeRoo relies on the term “spirituality,” to designate the underlying human disposition which we witness only in its mediated form. The mediated form is what he designates, “religion.” “‘Religion,’ or the religious expression of spirit, can itself be broken down into further levels of analysis. We can distinguish, then, between spirit and religiosity (i.e., the drive to express spirit religiously, rather than aesthetically, etc.), but we can also distinguish religiosity, as the drive to express spirit religiously, from its concrete expressions in particular religious *Stiftungen* [a *Stiftung* is a specific historical or institutional religious form], the different traditions or institutions that have arisen historically as distinct modes of the religious expression of spirit (Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, etc.)” (DeRoo 2020, 62). Current philosophies of religion are *Stiftung*-specific, i.e., either Christian or Jewish or such. DeRoo would like to construct a philosophy of religion centered on the underlying spirituality, which would be multi-religious and universal.

5. After observing that “the universality of the appearance of religious acts is beyond discussion,” Polish philosopher Zofia Zdybicka defines religion. “In sum, religion is a specific, conscious reference of man to something different and superior to him; it is a bilateral contact with someone who appears in a definite form and in a special human activity” (Zdybicka 1985, 139–40).

To avoid any misunderstanding, I do not recommend employing natural science for the purpose of proving the validity of distinctively Christian claims. Rather, I am recommending that knowledge about the natural world gained through microscopes and telescopes be integrated into systematic theology for doctrinal enhancement. “It’s a mistake (and strategically unsound) to try to prove or disprove religious beliefs on the basis of currently accepted scientific theories,” advises Vatican Observatory director Guy Consolmagno, S.J., “because most of those theories will likely change someday.”⁶

Regarding worldview construction, the public systematic theologian engages in the ongoing construction of an authentic yet provisional conceptual scheme within which everything—even what is learned via the sciences—is oriented toward the one God of gracious love. “One cannot do without a worldview,” observes philosopher and Christian theologian Nancey Murphy accurately (Murphy 2018, 124). The systematic theologian constructs a worldview within which all human experience is oriented toward the one God of loving grace. As constructive, this theologian draws and redraws a hypothetical picture of reality, the whole of reality.⁷

This constructive picture incorporates a second order explication of truth we assume by faith is already embedded at the symbolic level of first order understanding in scripture and tradition. Faith-seeking-understanding includes “the turning toward a philosophy that does not fear seeking the truth and explaining reality,” according to the Lublin Philosophical School (Krapiec and Maryniarczyk 2015, 440). Theology consists of critical reflection on faith, a reflection that includes posing truth questions.

Truth as pursued by the natural scientist has something in common with truth pursued by the Christian philosopher, namely, its universality. “The fundamental property of scientific truth is its universality—scientific truth is the truth for everyone...basic truths are the same for all people,” declares Józef Tischner (1982, 33). Science is comprehensive, just as faith in the God of creation and redemption is comprehensive. The dialogue between faith and science, according to Saint John Paul II, relies on a relevant principle:

6. Guy Consolmagno, S.J., and Paul Mueller, S.J., *Would You Baptize an Extraterrestrial?* (New York: Image, 2014) 44.

7. Like an electron in the cloud chamber viewed by the quantum physicist, God viewed by the theologian is invisible. In both science and theology, I recommend critical realism which is a realism that incorporates constructive model building. “Critical realism ... preserves the scientist’s realistic intent while recognizing that models and theories are imaginative human constructs. Models, on this reading, must be taken seriously but not literally” (Barbour 1974, 37). To see the parallels between scientific and theological method, see: (Peters and Peterson 2013).

“Truth cannot contradict truth” (John Paul II 1998a, 149). From the perspective of faith seeking understanding, natural science becomes an attractive partner.

WORLDVIEW CONSTRUCTION: DOES SCIENCE BELONG IN A THEOLOGICAL WORLDVIEW?

Do science and faith enjoy a warm partnership? Well, on the surface at least, it looks like war.

Every variant of the Christian worldview is under artillery attack from an army waving the flag of science. Naturalism today takes an aggressive form, marching under the banner of science while arming itself with reductionism, materialism, scientism, skepticism, and atheism. Science is the only path to knowledge, contends Oxford biochemist Peter Atkins, rendering illusory all religious claims to knowledge. “God is a synonym of intellectual defeat, the ultimate pessimism, the antithesis of the hopeful, optimistic driving force of science.” (Atkins, 2006, 126)

Harvard entomologist and sociobiologist E.O. Wilson is readying himself for Armageddon, the final defeat of religious darkness by the forces of scientific enlightenment.

The Armageddon in the conflict between science and religion ... began in earnest during the late twentieth century. It is the attempt by scientists to explain religion to its foundations....At its source, the struggle is not between people but between worldviews (Wilson 2012, 255).

Note the principal weapon in Wilson’s war: explanation. Wilson intends to defeat theology by supplying a scientific explanation for religion that is more adequate than the theologian’s explanation. From Wilson’s perspective, there is room on our planet for only one worldview, science. All competitors such as religion must surrender or suffer defeat. Because of the public face of both Christian philosophy and systematic theology, our concern here is less to defend the Christian worldview from naturalist attack than it is to engage naturalism with discourse clarification and counter-worldview construction for the sake of cultural understanding.

First, discourse clarification should take up the task of distinguishing between science and scientism. According to marching orders barked to the anti-religion army, we find ourselves in a war between religion and science. But, does everyone want to fight a war? No. There is no reason for war between authentic religion and authentic science. There is a war being fought, to be sure, but Wilson’s army represents scientism, not science.

Scientism is an ideology that arbitrarily asserts that science and science alone provide knowledge, rendering all other modes of human knowing false. “Scientism,” according to Saint John Paul II, “is the philosophical notion which refuses to admit the validity of forms of knowledge other than those of the positive sciences; and it relegates religious, theological, ethical, and aesthetic knowledge to the realm of mere fantasy” (John Paul II 1998b). This war is being fought over explanations.

“The problem is not science, but scientism,” complains former MIT philosopher of the world’s religions, Huston Smith; “namely, to assume that what science turns up and can turn up is the sum of all there is” (Smith 2003, 118).⁸ Smith continues:

Science is great. Scientism, though, is bad. What’s the difference? Science is the positive finding, through controlled experiment, of truths about the physical universe--and that’s good. Scientism, by way of contrast, says two things. The first is that science is the best if not the only probe of truth. The second fallacy of scientism is that it holds that the most fundamental substance in the universe is what scientists deal with, namely, matter. There is no scientific basis for those two corollaries.

Once the narrative promulgated by this naturalistic ideology is clarified, the public can get a better handle on authentic religion and authentic science.

The narrative that science and religion are at war is a myth in two key senses of the word: it is foundational to a certain anti-religious worldview, and it is historically false,

says Joshua Mortiz, managing editor of the journal, *Theology and Science* (Moritz 2016, 8)⁹.

8. On the one hand, the research scientist must rely on methodological reductionism in order to focus on efficient causation. On the other hand, reductionism becomes a worldview in scientism’s ideology. This needs clarification by the philosopher. “While there is certain justification for methodological reductionism in science as a research tool, this is different from eliminative or ontological reductionism which is a worldview” (Wong 2019, 62).

9. In some cases, religious defense includes hostility against science. An evolutionary biologist concurs on this clarification of the problem. “The problem people have with science is never the actual science. People have a problem with the implications of science for their worldview and, even more important, for their ideology. When anti-intellectualism rises to the surface, it is because there are new, urgent results coming out of the scientific community that challenge the perspective and status quo of people with power” (Hayhoe October 2017, 66).

The public systematic theologian needs military intelligence through discourse clarification to identify the following: the chief weapon in the arsenal of scientism is explanation—that is, providing a more adequate explanation of faith, scripture, and tradition than the theologian can. The Christian philosopher and the Christian theologian are threatened by intellectual jingoism here. What should be the philosophical and theological response?

The public systematic theologian or public Christian philosopher should carefully select the enemy: it's scientism and not authentic science. The systematic theologian actually needs authentic science to meet the criterion of applicability in worldview construction. Fuller Seminary theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, for example, promotes the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences, because the doctrine of creation itself requires the access to reality provided by science. Specifically, today's theologian ought not repristinate yesterday's doctrinal formulations because the modern scientific worldview differs from previous worldviews. "This engagement happens under a radically different worldview from that of the past: ours is dynamic, interrelated, evolving, in-the-making" (Karkkainen 2015, 10-1).¹⁰ In sum, genuine science provides a source for constructive doctrinal theology, a source in addition to scripture, tradition, and experience.

As we turn further toward worldview construction, the public systematic theologian both incorporates what is learned about nature through science into his or her doctrinal construction and, then, turns around to re-construct a more adequate explanation for nature than the naturalist can come up with. Big Bang cosmology, evolution, genetics, neuroscience, and astrobiology inform and expand the construction of doctrines such as creation, anthropology, and eschatology. Then, the public systematic theologian is ready to offer a gift to the wider public, namely, a more explanatorily adequate worldview that places the scientifically grasped cosmos within a more comprehensive context of divine creation and redemption.

This challenge to provide a more explanatorily adequate worldview that incorporates the best of science and the best of philosophy is taken up by mathematical cosmologist, George F.R. Ellis, along with philosopher and Christian theologian, Nancey Murphy. This duo's self-appointed theological task is "the reconstruction of a unified worldview" (Murphy and Ellis 1996, 1). Their proposed worldview does not include only the world.

10. "Theology cannot refrain from describing the world of nature and human history as the creation of God, or from claiming that only thus do we bring into view the true nature of the world. Theology must make this claim in dialogue with the sciences" (Pannenberg 1991–1998, 2:59).

It includes God who transcends the world. “Theology provides genuine knowledge of a transcendent reality” (Murphy and Ellis 1996, 7). Once the picture of reality they paint points to the God who transcends yet affects the picture, Ellis and Murphy contend that they offer greater purchase on reality. “Theology constitutes knowledge in exactly the same sense of the term as does science” (Murphy and Ellis 1996, 7). In the context of analyzing the debate over the anthropic principle and the fine tuning of the universe at the Big Bang, they draw a theologically informed picture of the world.

The (apparent) fine-tuning of the cosmological constants to produce a life-bearing universe (the anthropic issue) seems to call for explanation. A theistic explanation allows for a more coherent account of reality ... than does a non-theistic account.... God appears to work in concert with nature, never overriding or violating the very processes that God has created ... it implies a “kenotic” or self-renunciatory ethic, according to which one must renounce self-interest for the sake of the other, no matter what the cost to oneself... Hence, new research programs are called for in these fields, exploring the possibilities for human sociality in the light of a vision modeled on God’s own self-sacrificing love. (Murphy and Ellis 1996, xv)

This theologically constructed worldview retains a degree of provisionality along with a dialogical relationship with research science. Ellis and Murphy recommend to the scientific community directions for future scientific research.

After incorporating scientifically derived knowledge of the natural world, the theologian recommends to the scientist what the scientist might study. After incorporating scientific knowledge into doctrinal construction, faith can prompt a direction for laboratory research. In Berkeley, at the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, this method is called the Creative Mutual Interaction (CMI) between theology and science (Russell 2008, 22). Saint John Paul II puts meat on the CMI bones: “Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish” (John Paul II 1988, M13).

WHO HOLDS THE PATENT ON CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY?

As already said above, theology is thinking at the second level. In addition to reflecting critically on the first order language of faith, theology engages in second order analysis and synthesis of non-theological disciplines. Theology, according to Murphy, is

a second-order discipline that investigates problems in first-order disciplines such as science, history, logic, and especially for our interests, religion and Christian theology (Murphy 2018, 6).

Like Murphy, it is my contention that theology's constructive function takes place at the level of second order discourse, although I tend to use the term, "first order discourse," to refer to general human experience rather than university disciplines. Despite this slight difference, I concur that theology functions at the second or reflective level and theology needs to double-think or re-think the extra-theological disciplines.

According to its constructive function, the systematic theologian attempts to provide the most adequate, intelligible, and meaningful explanation of the basic structures of reality shared by the theologian and those in her or his context. To say it another way, the theologian explicates scripture and tradition in light of reason and experience by constructing a contemporary worldview.

Does the public theologian merely baptize a current fad, or even the current cultural self-understanding? No. The constructive component to systematic theology is both critical and transformative, both analytical and prophetic. It does not leave the contemporary situation to interpret itself but rather constructs new perspectives for understanding.

So, then, what does "constructive" mean here? The meaning of this term is in contention. A patent is pending for exclusive rights to the term, constructive theology, filed by a self-selected group of progressive theologians who affirm un-integrated pluralism and reject systematic construction. This group belongs in the category Plantinga describes as creative anti-realism. Accordingly, constructive theology

accepts the essential diversity of theological claims and opinions as a strength rather than as a fatal flaw or heresy. And, as abandoning the adjective "systematic" implies, it refuses any pretense that suggests theology can be completely systematized, and every doctrine logically cohered into one grand system (Wyman 2017, 324).

In short, the theologian collects a plurality of perspectives and consciously prevents their integration into a coherent scheme. Inadvertently, this school of constructive theology contributes to the problem of globe-wide fragmentation and incoherence that we wish to address here.

This is not a train I wish to board. These creative anti-reality constructivists leave no place for coherence let alone comprehensiveness. In contrast,

I recommend constructing a public systematic theology that can be measured against fragmentating forces and against competing worldviews on the basis of coherence. Therefore, my use of the term, coherence, retains its more traditional perhaps even Whiteheadian meaning. “Coherence’ ... means that the fundamental ideas, in terms of which the scheme is developed, presuppose each other so that in isolation they are meaningless” (Whitehead 1978, 3).

Alfred North Whitehead’s airplane analogy nicely depicts the ongoing construction of a conceptual scheme to account for reality at the highest level of generality. The flight of an airplane

starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight into the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation (Whitehead 1978, 5).

The airplane analogy aptly describes scientific theorizing in general, what the Karl Hempel tradition labels the hypothetico-deductive method. Scientific judgment begins with observation; rises via imaginative construction to hypotheses; tests the hypotheses against further observation; and then re-hypothesizes. During the flight of constructed hypotheses, coherence along with empirical observation—what I call applicability—measure the intelligibility of the hypotheses.¹¹ Perhaps the constructive theologian could benefit from paying the fare and boarding Whitehead’s airplane.

Whereas the constructive theologian described by the creative anti-realists remains satisfied staying on the ground and merely collecting “particular” observations, I contend that the constructive systematic theologian takes off repeatedly into flights of comprehensive generalization piloted by the philosopher. With each flight, the public systematic theologian constructs a more refined yet still provisional worldview that incorporates every particular within a comprehensive whole imbued by the love of our gracious God.

Coherence here refers both to the internal cohesiveness of a constructed doctrinal scheme as well as to the existential power of a worldview to provide meaning to one’s daily life.

11. The hypothesis renders the philosopher’s world scheme dynamic. “The existence of philosophical hypotheses allows for the continuous development of the system, manifested in providing an ever fuller and more compact explanation of reality” (Kaminski 2020, 70).

EXPLANATORY ADEQUACY WITHIN WORLDVIEW CONSTRUCTION

As we saw above, scientism's principal weapon in its war against religion is explanation. Scientism's strategy is to out-explain its religious enemy. What is the apologetic defense if not offense for the public Christian philosopher and the public systematic theologian? Relatively greater explanatory adequacy.

This leads me to proffer the criterion of explanatory adequacy to measure the relative success of Christian worldview construction. Borrowing from phenomenological hermeneutics, the theologian begins with first order biblical symbols embedded in the historical experience of the Church, interprets them, and then provides a rational account at the second order level of discourse. "All experience and all understanding is hermeneutical," avers David Tracy; rendering all theological explanation and interpretation of symbolic experience that is more basic (Tracy 1987, 77). This renders doctrinal construction relatively adequate, not absolute. The explication of Christian symbols sets as its goal the construction of the most adequate account of reality possible.

The public Christian philosopher or theologian should feel a responsibility to construct a comprehensive worldview in which all things are related to the one God of grace. This is an enormous task. God's world is enormous and grace is mysterious. "Grace," theologian Roger Haight rightly observes, "works both individually in persons and publicly in social endeavors, in human subjectivity but also as the creative energy of the universe" (Haight 2011, 429). Any theological claim that falls short of dealing with the whole of reality—including both the intimacy of subjectivity and the cosmic expanse that mystifies objectivity—is not yet an adequate theological claim.

EXPLANATORY ADEQUACY: FOUR CRITERIA

Some constructive schemes are more adequate than others. How do we measure their relative adequacy?¹² By exacting four criteria: by being applicable, comprehensive, logical, and coherent. Let me review each criterion briefly.

The term "applicable" means that there are some instances of actual contemporary experience to which theology applies. This is the empirical bite, the point of traction where theology digs into real life. Theology is not simply the telling of stories about other people in other times and places.

12. This material is drawn from previous work (Peters 2015, 141–7). These criteria of adequacy emerge from Whitehead's description of speculative philosophy in terms of logic, coherence, applicability, and adequacy in *Process and Reality*, 3–4. Differing from Whitehead, I make adequacy the inclusive concept and substitute comprehensiveness for his adequacy.

There must be at least one or more contemporary personal experiences for which theology gives the decisive—the most existentially meaningful—explanation. With regard to the plurality of local contextual theologies protected by the constructive theologians mentioned above, the applicability criterion requires an experiential connection with at least one if not more of these local perspectives.

The term “comprehensive” means that there are no significant experienced realities that in principle are not interpretable and explainable according to the theological scheme. Because of the finite limitations of every thinker, it is impossible and unnecessary actually to explain every detail of reality. Nevertheless, the texture of the proposed system should be porous so as to admit new experience with honest and meaningful incorporation. Each constructed worldview remains provisional, subject to the next revision. Worldview construction is ongoing.

The term “logical” means that theology should seek to be consistent, to avoid self-contradiction. If reality presents itself in experience as mysterious or as paradoxical, then this mystery or paradox should be reflected by an appropriate timidity in the system, by a recognition of the metaxic tension in existence.¹³ Logic does not demand that all the bumps and wrinkles be ironed out. But it does require that what is argued avoid fallacious reasoning and that it draw only warranted conclusions. It further requires that what is asserted in one place not contradict and thereby nullify what is said elsewhere.

Are there paradoxes and mysteries in our symbolic experience that limit logic or even render it impossible? Yes, of course.

Christians should be more prone to admit tensions and apparent contradictions because they believe the divine mind, which establishes reality, is higher than they can comprehend.... Unfortunately, we sometimes behave as if we were infallible,

avers philosophical theologian John Frame (2019, 125). Every worldview or constructive scheme confronts limits to the extent that self-contradiction

13. *Metaxy*, a term borrowed from Plato, alerts us to the inescapable tension between this world and what transcends this world. For the Orthodox, the *metaxy* is more than a raw or brute tension. The *metaxy* is bridged by wisdom, *sophia*. “The fundamental intuition of sophiology is ... that the gulf between the uncreated God and creation, brought into being out of nothing, does not put creation in opposition to God; rather, Wisdom constitutes a kind of *metaxu*.... Wisdom ... is the face that God turns towards his creation, and the face that creation, in human kind, turns towards God” (Louth 2013, 44).

can be avoided. Despite the limits this puts on logic, more logic is better than less.

Within this framework of criteria, the term, coherent, refers to an intra-systematic criterion: various principles within the system should complement one another. To cohere, they need to presuppose one another and to imply one another. One should be able to enter the system through any doctrinal door and be ushered gracefully throughout the entire conceptual house.¹⁴ A more coherent system is more adequate than an incoherent system.

A coherent theological scheme does not provide apodictic or inalterable truth. It claims less than the correspondence model of truth might claim because its object, God, resists objectification. Our relationship with God includes our subjectivity, which also resists objectification. Coherence, then, provides a relative or provisional criterion for truth, not a final or absolute criterion.

As the theologian reflects critically on first order symbolic discourse, the divine mystery rises up into his or her second order account. “The inconceivable majesty of God ... transcends all our concepts,” says the late theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. Theology

must begin with this because the lofty mystery that we call God is always close to the speaker and to all creatures, and prior to all our concepts it encloses and sustains all being, so that it is always the supreme condition of all reflection upon it and of all the resultant conceptualization. It must also end with God’s inconceivable majesty because every statement about God, if there is in it any awareness of what is being said, points beyond itself. Between this beginning and this end comes the attempt to give a rational account of our talk about God (Pannenberg 1991–1998, 1:337).

The conceptual work of the theologian measured by the criteria of explanatory adequacy sits like an island of reason within a larger sea of mystery. Self-criticism and willingness to revise always qualifies any high grade we might give ourselves after taking the explanatory adequacy test.

14. Borrowing the metaphor of the web or net of beliefs formulated by logician W.V.O. Quine, Nancey Murphy abandons the correspondence model of truth in favor of a coherence model. Truth is found in coherence, where beliefs require one another in a web or net. This “new picture of knowledge is salutary for religion scholars,” she writes. “No longer is there a need to find an unquestionable starting point, a theological foundation, before we can begin the task of theology proper” (Murphy 2018, 71).

The task of both the public Christian philosopher and the public systematic theologian is to try to explicate an understanding of more and more of contemporary life in terms of the ancient gospel. Like a stone generating ripples after being dropped into a still pond, systematic theology focuses its attention on the primal gospel revelation and then seeks continually to widen the circumference of this understanding until the whole is encompassed. Because of the finite, contextual, perspectival, dialectical, and temporal character of all human knowing, theological construction is ever in process. It is never final or fixed. Hence, the theologian must frequently go back to the beginning, drop the stone into the water again, and follow the ripples out anew.

INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY AND RELATIVE ADEQUACY

Worldview construction is a continuing task, even a never-ending task. God is incorrigibly mysterious and, in addition, new learnings repeatedly lead to mind changes and theory revisions. Each constructed worldview is lifted up as a hypothesis, and its explanatory power is only relatively adequate rather than absolute. The public theologian marches constantly from yesterday's worldview to tomorrow's reconstruction while daily engaging in dialogue and absorbing criticism. On this count, the theologian should embrace intellectual humility.

It is similarly the case for the skeptic who, at least in principle, should feel obligated to embrace intellectual humility. "We propose that intellectual humility is an overarching approach to evidence that the skeptical movement may wish to embrace as a guiding credo." We find this credo in a recent issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer*.

Intellectual humility is a fundamentally 'metacognitive' (thinking about thinking) construct, meaning that intellectual humble individuals habitually reflect on their thinking processes, applying the principles of skepticism to their own reasoning (Lilienfeld et al. September/October 2020, 33).

As suggested by Pawel Tarasiewicz, if Christian philosophy relies on understanding and if understanding itself is convincing, then no need exists for an augment of rhetorical persuasion.

The scientist—the scientist with intellectual integrity, not the reductionist or naturalist—stands humble before the data. When the data change, the scientist is morally obligated to consider theory alteration to account for it. Theologians and philosophers may wish to emulate their friends in the laboratory in embracing the virtue of intellectual humility and openness to revision.

The public Christian philosopher and the public systematic theologian have an extra reason for intellectual humility, namely, the mystery of God. The absoluteness of God does not translate into the absoluteness of theology. This renders constructive theology hypothetical, subject to repeated revision. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly,” writes St. Paul; “but then we will see face to face.” (1 Corinthians 13:12). That face to face revelation of God remains in our future, in our eschatological future, according to Pannenberg.

Only the eschatological consummation of the world will bring definitive proof of God’s existence and final clarification of the character of his nature and works (Pannenberg 1991–1998, 3:631).

Between now and the definitive revelation of God which will also reveal finally the true nature of reality, the best the constructive theologian can do is try on one hypothesis after the other for size. The success of each will be measured by its capacity to comprehend coherently more and more of known and anticipated reality.

CONCLUSION

The electronic noosphere binding while dividing our global communications consciousness riddles us with competing worldviews. The cacophony of incommensurable claims deafens our ears with discombobulated sounds. Our thirst for a single coherent grasp of reality goes unquenched.¹⁵ How might the public Christian philosopher in league with the public systematic theologian steer the disharmony toward harmony? I answer: through discourse clarification and synthetic worldview construction. The public Christian philosopher and public systematic theologian should invite those experiencing confusion to consider a relatively more adequate explanation of reality that shows how all things are related to the one God of grace and love.

Pannenberg is a theologian willing to enter the competition, to offer a more comprehensive and more coherent account of reality.

In the competition of religions the issue is whether in the light of one specific understanding of ultimate and in the main divinely conceived reality, the world and humanity as they are can be comprehended in a more appropriate and nuanced way than in terms of rival approaches (Pannenberg, 1991–98, 2:xiv).

15. “What I think we have is a crisis of incoherence,” exclaims sociologist of religion, Robert Bellah. (Bellah, 2011, xix)

By beginning with the specially revealed gospel and drawing upon philosophical reasoning to draw out its implications, the public Christian philosopher along with the public systematic theologian would be in a position to construct a world scheme that is ultimate, comprehensive, applicable, logical, and coherent. The measure of success would be this worldview's explanatory adequacy when measured against naturalistic scientism and other competitors.

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