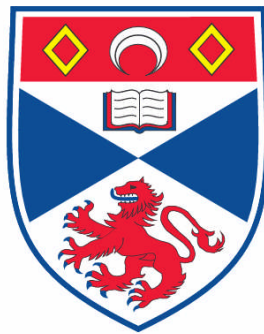


**THE THEOLOGY OF REVELATION AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF  
CHRISTIAN BELIEF : THE COMPATIBILITY AND  
COMPLEMENTARITY OF THE THEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGIES  
OF KARL BARTH AND ALVIN PLANTINGA**

**Kevin S. Diller**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St. Andrews**



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**UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS**

**ST MARY'S COLLEGE**



**THE THEOLOGY OF REVELATION AND  
THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN  
BELIEF:**

**THE COMPATIBILITY AND COMPLEMENTARITY OF  
THE THEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGIES OF  
KARL BARTH AND ALVIN PLANTINGA**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED BY**

**KEVIN S. DILLER**

**TO THE FACULTY OF DIVINITY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**ST ANDREWS, SCOTLAND**

**MARCH 2008**

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## ABSTRACT

This study brings Christian theology and Christian analytic philosophy into dialogue through an examination of the compatibility and complementarity of Karl Barth's theology of revelation, and Alvin Plantinga's epistemology of Christian belief.

The first two chapters are aimed at elucidating the central features of Karl Barth's theology of revelation and clarifying his attitude toward the place of philosophy in theology. We establish that, for Barth, human knowledge of God is objective, personal, cognitive knowing, enabled by the Spirit's transforming gift of participation in revelation. We dispel the notion that Barth is hostile to philosophy *per se* and chart the boundaries he gives for its interface with theology.

In chapters 3 and 4, we focus on Alvin Plantinga's Christian epistemology of warranted belief, and its relationship to Barth's theology of revelation. A general alignment emerges in their shared inductive approach and agreed rejection of the necessity and sufficiency of human arguments for warranted Christian belief. Their contributions are complementary, with Barth providing what Plantinga lacks in theological depth, and Plantinga providing what Barth lacks in philosophical clarity and defense. Despite their general compatibility, two areas of significant potential incompatibility are flagged for closer analysis in the final two chapters.

In chapter 5, we consider their views on natural theology. We extend our thesis of complementarity with respect to negative apologetics, and argue for a harmonizing interpretation of their views with respect to a potential positive contribution from natural theology. The final chapter addresses the role of faith and the constitution of a genuine human knowledge of God. We conclude that Barth and Plantinga do not disagree about the personal and propositional character of revelation, but may disagree about the possibility of a generically theistic *de re* knowledge of God independent of the Spirit's gift of faith.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## DEDICATION

To Professor Alan Torrance, in whose debt I will ever remain, for his trenchant theological insight, tenacious encouragement and unflagging demonstration of the most profound courage, charity and generosity in the face of tremendous adversity.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Karl Barth:

- BH* “Ein Briefwechsel mit Adolf von Harnack,” in *Theologische Fragen und Antworten* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1957).
- BHet* H. Martin Rumscheidt, ed., *Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), 29–53.
- DH* “Die dogmatische Prinzipienlehre bei Wilhelm Herrmann,” (lectures delivered to the Wissenschaftlichen Predigerverein in Hannover, May 1925) in *Vorträge und Kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925*, ed. Holger Finze (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1990), 545–603.
- DHet* “The Principles of Dogmatics According to Wilhelm Herrmann,” in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920–1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 238–271.
- EI* *Ethik I: Vorlesung Münster, Sommersemester 1928*, ed. Dietrich Braun (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973)
- Eet* *Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 1–260.
- KD I/1* *Die kirchliche Dogmatik: Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes. Teil I* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1932).
- CD I/1* *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, pt. 1, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975).
- PT* Karl Barth, “Philosophie und Theologie,” in *Philosophie und Christliche Existenz: Festschrift für Heinrich Barth*, ed. Gerhard Huber (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1960), 93–106.
- PTet* “Philosophy and Theology,” in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 79–95.
- SIT* “Schicksal und Idee in Der Theologie,” (lectures delivered at the Hochschulinstitut in Dortmund, February–March 1929) in *Theologische Fragen und Antworten* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1957), 54–92.
- SITet* “Fate and Idea in Theology,” trans. George Hunsinger, in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 25–61.

Alvin Plantinga:

- GOM*    *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967).
- RGB*    “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16–93.
- WCB*    *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- WCD*    *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- WPF*    *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

## INTRODUCTION

There is a certain kind of pleasant disappointment that comes when, upon finally meeting head-to-head a long standing and deeply respected opponent, a much anticipated fight evaporates into essential agreement. There are those for whom such a disappointment is not pleasant at all, who would generally prefer fighting over peace. We can, after all, so cherish the principle at stake in the fight that we begin mistakenly to associate the fight with that principle itself. The advantage, however, of a fighting impulse is that it prevents an easy concord—an all too quick and simple resolution that, for its failure to trouble the heart of the matter, turns true enemies into false friends and invites them to tea.

Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga are not long standing opponents, and neither are they acknowledged as close comrades. They are, in fact, rarely brought into dialogue at all, and not without some reason. The surface picture is doubtful for the prospect of fruitful exchange. There is the obvious separation of more than a generation, making the opportunity for interaction rather one-sided. Barth was 46 years old and had just finished his first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* when Plantinga was born. At the time of Barth's death in 1968 Plantinga was 36 years old and had only just published his first major work, *God and Other Minds*. Plantinga confirms that he never met Barth in

person.<sup>1</sup> Contextual and disciplinary distinctions also seem to place Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga worlds apart—absorbed in different questions, using different methods and addressing different audiences. Barth, as a theologian with particular philosophical concerns, addresses himself to theology, with the audience of philosophical theologians and philosophers of religion being only a distant second.<sup>2</sup> Plantinga's audience is not as clear-cut. He is a philosopher with particular theological concerns addressing himself to philosophical theology and philosophical atheology. What may seem a chasm between the disciplines of philosophy and theology for Barth, can appear almost transparent for Plantinga. Barth's core objective, it will be argued, is to challenge perspectives on theological epistemology predominantly and uncritically accepted in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century theology. Plantinga's work, on the other hand, is, to a large degree, aimed at challenging philosophical arguments against Christian belief on philosophy's own terms.

Disciplinary differences, however, have never stopped theologians from doing philosophy or philosophers from doing theology. The real reason for our restrained expectations is that Barth is often understood to have denounced quite explicitly the possibility of a fruitful dialogue with philosophy. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Plantinga's closest philosophical compatriot,<sup>3</sup> expresses this common view: "Barth has little direct influence on philosophy. There is, in that, a certain historical justice: Barth made clear that in his theology he had little use for philosophy. He regarded philosophical theology as idolatrous; and as to philosophy of religion, he insisted that Christianity is not a religion."<sup>4</sup> The reigning view seems to be that, in his zeal to preserve the character and

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<sup>1</sup> It would seem that Plantinga's best opportunity to have met Karl Barth would have been on his 1962 U.S. lecture tour while Plantinga was teaching philosophy at Wayne State University. That same year Plantinga attended a colloquium of philosophers and theologians at Princeton Seminary where Barth's views were at the center of debate. See *Faith and the Philosophers*, ed. John Hick (London: MacMillan & Co Ltd, 1964), 159–200.

<sup>2</sup> In an article written in honor of his brother, a philosopher, Barth describes the chasm separating theology from philosophy but cautions that "the philosopher and the theologian will surely before everything else not permit themselves to be farther apart than within earshot or to lose sight of each other" (*PTet*, 90 [*PT*, 102]).

<sup>3</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Self-Profile," in *Alvin Plantinga*, eds. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1985), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Reformed Tradition," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion: Blackwell Companions to Philosophy*, eds. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 166.

freedom of theology, Barth utters a resounding “No!” to any role for philosophy.<sup>5</sup> This injunction is taken to be an absolute parting of ways, where philosophy is “excommunicated as not merely an alien but an enemy.”<sup>6</sup> Brian Hebblethwaite blames Karl Barth for the persisting divide between Christian philosophers and theologians, claiming that Barth rejected “any ‘points of connection’ between theology and philosophy.” He contends that Barthianism takes the “extreme position” that theology has its own philosophically inaccessible, internal logic, and is, therefore, “protected from debate and criticism.”<sup>7</sup> This presents a daunting initial picture of incompatibility between Plantinga and Barth.

The primary conclusion of the research here conducted is that there is very little warrant for the initial supposition of incompatibility, and far greater support for a positive

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<sup>5</sup> Barth has clearly and famously said a resounding “No!” to natural theology in his response to Emil Brunner (*Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner* [München: Kaiser, 1934]). This denouncing of natural theology is misunderstood by some to be an embargo on all philosophy. It is common, particularly of philosophers, to suggest that Barth’s approach is: “anti-philosophical” (John Edwin Smith, “Experience and Its Religious Dimension: Response to Vincent G. Potter,” in *Reason, Experience, and God*, ed. Vincent Michael Colapietro [New York: Fordham University Press, 1997], 93, 98); posits an “inherent opposition between faith and reason” (Dewey J. Houtenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* [Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991], 238); “allow[s] very little place to reason” (John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2d ed. [New York: Scribner, 1977], 16); “has had the courage to break with philosophy frankly and thoroughly” (Brand Blanshard, “Critical Reflections on Karl Barth,” in *Faith and the Philosophers*, ed. John Hick [London: MacMillan & Co Ltd, 1964], 159); recommends “theology should not touch philosophy with a barge pole” (Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to Its Sources, Principles, and History* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991], 43); and, “rejects philosophy as the work of the devil” (Kevin Hart, “The Experience of God,” in *The Religious*, ed. John D. Caputo [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002], 161).

<sup>6</sup> H. L. Stewart, “The ‘Reverent Agnosticism’ Of Karl Barth,” *Harvard Theological Review* 43, no. 3 (1950): 231.

<sup>7</sup> *Philosophical Theology and Christian Doctrine*, Exploring the Philosophy of Religion, 3 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 5. Hebblethwaite singles out T. F. Torrance as a prime exemplar of this noetically insular Barthian theological position. The reference Hebblethwaite offers, however, refutes his own claim. Torrance is clear and emphatic that, “The interior or material logic of theological knowledge does not allow us to neglect the external or formal logic of our human modes of thought and speech” (T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* [London: Oxford University Press, 1969], 219). One aim of the first chapter will be to show that just as Hebblethwaite is wrong about Torrance, he is also wrong about Barth.

assessment of the compatibility and complementarity of Barth's theology of revelation and Plantinga's epistemology of Christian belief. Barth's chief concern can be expressed negatively, though incompletely, as a denial of the possibility of a theological epistemology *from below*. In similar terms, Plantinga's project can be summarized as a denial of the impossibility of a theological epistemology *from above*. This is not to suggest that the relationship between their thought can simply be construed as two sides of the same coin. Not settling for an easy peace, we will have to consider several points of conflict and divergence along the way before arriving at what will turn out to be a qualified positive assessment.

Our approach will focus, though not exclusively, on the first part of the first volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*. The study is divided into three parts, the first two examining the main lines of the proposals of Barth and Plantinga respectively, and the third concentrating on areas of potentially significant disagreement. Part 1 devotes two chapters to Barth's theology of revelation and its implications for the dialogue with philosophy. Part 2 consists of two chapters focused on Plantinga's Christian philosophy, his epistemology of warranted belief, and the contrasting relationship between Plantinga's views and Barth's theology of revelation. These first four chapters are written to provide, in detailed relief, an exposition and comparison of the decisive features of their theological epistemologies. The intent is to set-out with as much clarity as possible the pivotal elements of their arguments, in order to grasp the heart of their views and to minimize, as far as possible, false impressions created by difficulties in conceptual translation. We give particular attention to the intersections between their very different campaigns as we trace their common opposition to the despotism of the epistemological canons of Enlightenment rationalism, and shared commitment to a knowledge of God dependent on God's own revealing. Along the way, we engage critiques and misapprehensions of their thought and highlight the points of greatest tension between them. The chief conclusion of the first two parts of the study is that, in the main, and with respect to a number of critical details, Barth's view of revelation and Plantinga's notion of warranted Christian belief are remarkably compatible.

Part 3 offers an additional two chapters, analyzing the most significant areas of potential disagreement raised in the preceding investigation of their thought. We first consider just where Plantinga and Barth stand relative to each other in the historic debate over natural theology and the possibility of general revelation. We then take a closer look

at how each conceives of the nature of faith and what constitutes a genuine human knowledge of God. These issues test the limits of the compatibility of their thought, though we again find substantial concord, even at the points of greatest apparent discontinuity. Each of these chapters identifies a point at which Plantinga and Barth appear to part ways, and suggests possible approaches to synthesis. The principle contribution of the third part of this study is to bolster the general positive assessment of compatibility, while qualifying that assessment with specific potential limitations. Throughout our discussions, we will find several opportunities to support and extend the position of one thinker with that of the other. These instances support a secondary thesis of the complementarity of the theological epistemologies of Plantinga and Barth.

Beyond the specific aims of this study with respect to Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga, it is also hoped that a contribution will be made more broadly to enlivening exchange between Christian theology and Christian analytic philosophy. Russell R. Reno has recently and perceptively highlighted a perplexing cleavage that exists between contemporary Christian theology and contemporary Christian analytic philosophy. He does not offer an historical analysis of its development, but does express lament over the fact that theology has largely ignored a party of philosophical partners who exhibit particular promise for assisting with theology's postmodern challenges. "Catholic or not, in the main [theology] cannot see the apparent renewal of philosophy in the English-speaking world. Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen, William Alston, and the rest of the Society of Christian Philosophers can meet for twenty years, but theology remains blind. . . ."<sup>8</sup> By focusing on a question of central importance, in light of the thought of two intellectual giants, who have, to a great degree, shaped the landscapes of these disciplines, this study may be seen both as an attempt to overcome the divide between Christian theology and Christian analytic philosophy, and as a case-study to support Reno's intuition that a significant compatibility exists between at least some of those inhabiting these disciplines at the level of fundamental loyalties. It is hoped, furthermore, that enlivening dialogue in the area of theological epistemology with a view to clarifying core commitments, terms, and the implications of positions each for the other will help to correct misconceptions which may have discouraged exchange in the past and in that way contribute to a revival of constructive collaboration.

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<sup>8</sup> R. R. Reno, "Theology's Continental Captivity," *First Things* 162 (2006): 29.



PART I:  
KARL BARTH'S THEOLOGY OF  
REVELATION AND  
PHILOSOPHICAL ENGAGEMENT

# 1

## **BARTH'S THEOLOGY OF REVELATION: THE WAY *VON OBEN***

The intent of these first two chapters is to explore Barth's uncompromising theologically driven epistemology along with his safeguards against the usurpations of philosophy. I will endeavor to show that Barth's attitude toward philosophy is understood best in the light of his theology of revelation, centered on the self-revelation of God in Christ by the Spirit. I will begin in this chapter with an analysis of the salient implications of his theology of revelation for theological knowing. The second chapter will look at how these implications shape Barth's understanding of the role of philosophy in theology. I will attempt to elucidate Barth's central concerns and their implications for the relationship between faith and philosophy, charting what seems to be Barth's notion of philosophy's proper function. In chapters three and four we will bring Plantinga into dialogue with Barth's concerns and see to what extent the initial supposition of conflict evaporates into essential agreement.

The first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* is, above all else, Barth's attempt to elucidate and defend the "way of knowledge"<sup>1</sup> followed in theology. It is legitimate to refer to this as Barth's theological epistemology though sharply distinguishing it from a

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<sup>1</sup> CD I/1, 25 (KD I/1, 23, "Erkenntnisweg"), an account of "how knowledge is attained."

general theory of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Barth's *theological* epistemology is exclusively focused on the knowledge of God as the gift of God, and therefore diverges in both scope and direction from general epistemologies. Nevertheless, Barth addresses the chief questions posed by any theory of knowledge, including the nature, object, subject, source, direction and criteria of theological knowing. A brief exposition and clarification of Barth's theology of revelation will allow us to draw the following conclusions about Barth's theological epistemology: 1) the principles of theological knowing are known in reflection on the gift of the knowledge of God; 2) knowing God is personal, cognitive, participative knowing; 3) knowing God is divinely initiated, self-attesting, grace; and, 4) knowing God effects personal transformation. Once this groundwork is established, we will move on in chapter two to discuss the implications for Barth's view of the relationship between philosophy and theology.

### ***Knowing in Reflection on Revelation***

The key move in any theory of knowing is the first move, or the logically primary move. How does an epistemology get off the ground or what primal glue holds it together? In the case of theological epistemology we are particularly concerned with what basis is given for the possibility of knowing God. In order to understand Barth's distinctive theological epistemology, therefore, it is important to pay close attention to how it emerges. Barth suggests, at one point, that his comments on knowing God are simply an "analysis of the biblical concept of revelation."<sup>3</sup> As even an expeditious stroll through the *Church Dogmatics* will attest, at every turn Barth defends the legitimacy of his position by appeal to Scripture. Scripture as the written word of God has the 'supremacy.'<sup>4</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that either the Bible or a biblically informed theory of revelation are for Barth the *foundation* of a theological system of knowing. Here enters Barth's famous qualification that Scripture is not

---

<sup>2</sup> Some comments on human cognition in general can be found in *KD* II/1 §27. See Andrew McFarlane, "Sense and Spontaneity: A Critical Study of Barth's Kantian Model of Human Cognition in *CD* II/1," paper given at the *Scottish Barth Colloquium* (St Andrews University, St Mary's College: 2006).

<sup>3</sup> *CD* I/1, 359 (*KD* I/1, 379, "Analyse des biblischen Offenbarungsbegriffes").

<sup>4</sup> *CD* I/1, 102 (*KD* I/1, 105, "die Überlegenheit"). Holy Scripture is supreme over proclamation. Scripture imposes itself as norm for the church (*CD* I/1, 106; *KD* I/1, 109).

revelation but a means<sup>5</sup> used by God to “bear witness to revelation.”<sup>6</sup> The initiating move in Barth’s theological epistemology is not the claim that the Bible by itself, or the Bible read in the light of human reason, is the foundation or source of knowledge. Barth believes that the real initiating move is not a claim we make but a claim made on us. The initial move is made by God himself. In the light of this initiating self-revelation, we see that God is not revealed by us or the Bible, or anything other than God himself. The basis for the possibility of knowing God is “God’s action on man.”<sup>7</sup> It is “not therefore that man has grasped at the Bible but that the Bible has grasped at man”<sup>8</sup>—or more directly that God has acted to reveal himself through the means of the written word. In Barth’s view, therefore, there are no first principles to establish or appeal to. God has taken the initiating action, such that “already on the way, we give an account of the way which we tread.”<sup>9</sup> What is taken as the *a priori* ground of knowing in Barth’s theological epistemology is the effectual self-revealing action of God making himself known to us prior to any theological reflection. This is why Barth insists that the path of knowing is from above to below (*von oben nach unten*).<sup>10</sup> It is common for commentators well versed in the philosophical debates in epistemology to struggle to grasp this theo-

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<sup>5</sup> By referring to Scripture as a medium, means, instrument or form, Barth is emphatic that Scripture is useless on its own. Compare these statements: “Thus God does reveal Himself in statements, through the medium (*Mittel*) of speech, and indeed of human speech” (*CD I/1*, 137–138; *KD I/1*, 142), and “The fact that God takes form does not give rise to a medium (*kein Medium*), a third thing between God and man, a reality distinct from God that is as such the subject of revelation” (*CD I/1*, 321; *KD I/1*, 339).

<sup>6</sup> *CD I/1*, 111 (*KD I/1*, 114, “Offenbarung bezeugt”). We will touch upon this again in chapter 6.

<sup>7</sup> *CD I/1*, 110 (*KD I/1*, 113, “Handeln Gottes am Menschen”). Note that I have not endeavored to update the translations with gender inclusive language. All of Barth’s references to *Mensch(en)*, translated ‘man’ or ‘men,’ should be understood to be gender inclusive.

<sup>8</sup> *CD I/1*, 110 (*KD I/1*, 113, “also nicht daraufhin, daß der Mensch nach der Bibel, sondern daraufhin, daß die Bibel nach dem Menschen gegriffen hat”).

<sup>9</sup> *CD I/1*, 43 (*KD I/1*, 43, “geben wir uns—schon auf dem Wege befindlich—Rechenschaft über den Weg, den wir gehen”).

<sup>10</sup> Barth uses the expression “von unten nach oben” to describe the wrong way to ground theological knowing and to distinguish from the only proper and indeed possible orientation for theology “von oben nach unten” (*KD I/1*, 135, 178, 179, 189, 255, 440). This does not mean that the medium of revelation is not of the *unten*. The incarnation is an historical, this-worldly, and indeed empirical reality; nevertheless, the *Ursprung* is *von oben* and therefore the way of revelation, the way we come to know God “von oben nach unten führt” (*KD I/1*, 440; *CD I/1*, 419).

foundationalism<sup>11</sup> in Barth. In order to make sense of Barth, often an expedition is launched to unearth a basic principle that is motivating his thought—the *real* foundation or source.<sup>12</sup> Barth insists, however, that his theological reflections (whether it be on the wholly otherness of God, the freedom of God or the fallenness of humans) are not the basis of his view of revelation, but really are reflections based on the revelation given.<sup>13</sup> What may seem confusing is that at no point does Barth offer an argument to ground this supposition. He urges instead that all theology should be done as an attempt to think correctly *from this a priori*.<sup>14</sup> *Von oben nach unten*.

The discussion so far has introduced Barth's theo-foundational, from-above view of theological knowing, and should be sufficient to establish the first proposition about Barth's theological epistemology: *1) the principles of theological knowing are known in reflection on the gift of the knowledge of God.*

### ***God as Object and Subject of His Personal, Cognitive Revelation***

It is Barth's radical reorientation of the starting point and direction of theological knowing that explains his assertion that the primary question in theological reflection is

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<sup>11</sup> In adopting the term *theo-foundationalism* to apply to Barth's theological epistemology I do not intend to suggest that Barth has committed himself to a general foundationalism. Other metaphors could be substituted so long as they affirm that the ground for the knowledge of God is not only given by God, but as we shall discuss next, *is* God in his self-revelation. The distinction between classical foundationalism and what I am calling Barth's theo-foundationalism will be clarified in chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup> Both Helm and Wolterstorff determine that what motivates Barth's theology of revelation is his notion of the sovereign freedom of God. See Paul Helm, *The Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues*, Foundations for Faith (London: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1982), 40–41; and, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 73–74. Looking for a hidden motivator for Barth's theological epistemology is an academically legitimate pursuit. It must, however, be recognized that Barth believed that the ground for knowing God really is laid and occupied *a priori* by God himself.

<sup>13</sup> As Alan Torrance observes, "our very conceptions of divine freedom are themselves freely conditioned by God" (*Persons in Communion: an Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996], 49).

<sup>14</sup> "All its knowledge, even its knowledge of the correctness of its knowledge, can only be an event, and cannot therefore be guaranteed as correct knowledge from any place apart from or above this event" (*CD* I/1, 42; *KD* I/1, 42).

not “How do we know God?” but rather “Who is our God?”<sup>15</sup> The *how* question only becomes the initial question if we are starting from outside of the fact of the reality of *given* revelation. Theology, as a second order reflection on a first-hand personal revelation, seeks to clarify its understanding of who this revealed God is. This is just what Barth attempts to do in his theology of revelation. God is none other than who he, through himself, reveals himself to be in his revelation. The nature of the knowledge of God is the *self-revealing* revelation of God.<sup>16</sup>

To grasp properly what Barth is saying, it may be helpful to distinguish, as Barth does, the components of revelation. There is the revealer, the act of revealing, and the consequence or effect of the act of revealing (which Barth calls the “revealedness”). Barth maps these to the persons of the Trinity, united yet distinct as the Revealer, Revelation and Revealedness. He contends that this is what “distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian.”<sup>17</sup> Revelation (*Offenbarung*) has an objective and a subjective sense. We use it to refer either to the objective action and content being revealed, or to the subjective appropriation that results from being revealed to. In Barth’s notion of revelation these two senses are united, though distinct. In the act of revelation, the revealer is united to the content and reception of revelation. Revelation is the address of God. Revelation “is itself the Word of God.” Jesus Christ is the Revelation of God. God is his revelation.<sup>18</sup> “He is also His self-revealing.”<sup>19</sup> The effect of revelation in us is the gift of the Spirit. In this way, God remains “indissolubly subject, in His revelation”<sup>20</sup>

Many clear-headed individuals in the English speaking world, and especially those with a background in analytic philosophy, will find the sentences of the preceding paragraph highly perplexing, if not nonsensical.<sup>21</sup> For some, such Barthianisms are evidence of Barth’s anti-rational tendencies. After all, if revelation is interlaced with the

<sup>15</sup> CD I/1, 301 (KD I/1, 317, “die konkrete und entscheidende Frage: Wer ist [unser] Gott?”).

<sup>16</sup> See CD I/1, 295–304 (KD I/1, 311–320, “sich offenbarenden Gott”).

<sup>17</sup> CD I/1, 301 (KD I/1, 318, “die den christlichen Offenbarungsbegriff als christlichen vor allen möglichen andren Gotteslehren und Offenbarungsbegriffen grundlegend auszeichnet”).

<sup>18</sup> CD I/1, 118 (KD I/1, 121, “Sie [Offenbarung] ist selber das Wort Gottes”).

<sup>19</sup> CD I/1, 299 (KD I/1, 315, “Gott selbst ist . . . auch sein Sich-Offenbaren”).

<sup>20</sup> CD I/1, 382 (KD I/1, 403, “der in seiner Offenbarung Subjekt ist, und zwar unauflöslich Subjekt ist”).

<sup>21</sup> Harnack apparently found such constructions in Barth utterly “obscure” (James McConkey Robinson and Jürgen Moltmann, eds., *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology* [Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968]). Quoted in George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 331–334.

mystery of the Trinity, what hope is there of understanding it? Some Barth interpreters suggest that the confusions and apparent contradictions in Barth's writing are intended to be just that. It is not that Barth's theology is anti-rational, but that it confronts and is confronted by the crisis of human language and fallen reason. On this view, we will reach a point in Barth's writing where rational tensions cannot and should not be resolved; and furthermore, retaining unresolved confusion is what it means really to *get* Barth. Stephen Webb expresses this view when he writes, "it is possible that more sense can be made from Barth's position than I have allowed here, but really to read Barth is to refuse to resist his endless perplexities and contradictions."<sup>22</sup> In the present case applying this principle would be doubly confusing: In a way we cannot humanly conceive of, God gives us a knowledge of God that we cannot know. What is at issue here is at the heart of our main concern about Barth's attitude towards reason and philosophy, and the prospects of constructive dialogue with Alvin Plantinga. The contention we face here is that Barth is finally and only an apophatic theologian. He may appear to be making positive theological claims, but he then expunges any meaning associated with those claims, so that they are ultimately negations and not claims at all. If it is actually the case that Barth is merely an apophatic theologian, then it is hard to see how there can be positive, cognitive Christian belief—much less a discussion about its warrant. Moreover, by radically undercutting reason and language such a position, appealing to reason and expressed in language, is patently self-defeating.

Surely the mere apophatic Barth is an option we can quickly dismiss. On the one hand, Barth does commonly use dialectic negatively, to cut through a false synthesis.<sup>23</sup> This negative action, however, is almost always part of a positive theological declaration. Barth is clearly not saying that God in God's self-revealing revelation remains *unrevealed*.<sup>24</sup> Barth is making a concrete cognitive claim: "We have made a positive

<sup>22</sup> Stephen H. Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991), 74.

<sup>23</sup> Barth commonly uses dialectic negatively, to cut-down a false synthesis, most pungently in his earlier period. "How things were cleared away there and almost only cleared away!" (*The Humanity of God* [London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960], 43). See also Paul Brazier, "Barth's First Commentary on Romans (1919): An Exercise in Apophatic Theology?," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 4 (2004).

<sup>24</sup> Barth does affirm that in the mediation itself, God remains hidden (*CD* I/1, 175ff, 320ff; *KD* I/1, 180ff, 338ff). This will be discussed further in chapter 6. It is sufficient here to affirm that, though God is unveiled through a veil, God is really revealed.

assertion, pronouncing a definite Yes to the knowability of the Word of God.”<sup>25</sup> He is even willing to declare that it is possible for a human knowledge of God to be “a clear and certain knowledge, not equal but at least similar to the clarity and certainty with which God knows Himself in His Word.”<sup>26</sup> Interpreting Barth as merely apophatic undermines Barth’s central thesis about revelation—namely that revelation is the effectual self-revealing of God. The crisis of language and fallen human reason are neither the first nor the final word. God in Christ miraculously overcomes these humanly insurmountable barriers to make himself known by the power of the Spirit. And if these considerations are not enough, Barth explicitly condemns apophatism as a *way to God*.<sup>27</sup> “Even knowledge of the impossibility of knowledge of the Word of God outside its reality is possible only on the presupposition of this real knowledge.”<sup>28</sup> An apophatic way to God, as a negative human word, might suggest a means of arriving at the destination by human steam.<sup>29</sup> Barth’s theology of revelation may strike some as initially obscure, but there is no reason to think that by it Barth merely intends to be obscurant. To be sure, revelation is for Barth both a miracle and mystery;<sup>30</sup> but, it would be neither if it were not a real revealing.

Returning then to Barth’s core claim about revelation—that “God the Revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect”<sup>31</sup>—it may be possible to clarify what Barth means by looking more closely at what seems so perplexing about it. One challenge is to understand how both identity and distinction can be

<sup>25</sup> CD I/1, 196 (KD I/1, 204, “haben in bezug auf die Erkennbarkeit des Wortes Gottes ein bestimmtes Ja ausgesprochen”).

<sup>26</sup> CD I/1, 243 (KD I/1, 256, “die Möglichkeit einer gewissen und klaren Erkenntnis, nicht gleich, wohl aber ähnlich der Gewißheit und Klarheit, in der Gott in seinem Worte sich selber erkennt”).

<sup>27</sup> “An indication of the limits of our conceiving . . . must not be allowed to condense into a negative proof” (CD I/1, 164; KD I/1, 170, “ein Aufweis der Grenzen unseres Begreifens . . . der sich auch nicht zu einem negativen Beweis verdichten wollen darf.”).

<sup>28</sup> CD I/1, 197 (KD I/1, 206, “Auch die Erkenntnis der Unmöglichkeit der Erkenntnis des Wortes Gottes außerhalb ihrer Wirklichkeit ist nur möglich unter Voraussetzung dieser wirklichen Erkenntnis”).

<sup>29</sup> As Colin Gunton has noted, “the apparent modesty and humility of the negative way masks quite a different movement, a movement for unity with God which operates apart from that communion mediated through Jesus” (*Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 63). Of course, apophaticism does not require this assumed independent movement.

<sup>30</sup> CD I/1, 331 (KD I/1, 350).

<sup>31</sup> CD I/1, 296 (KD I/1, 312, “Gott, der Offenbarer, identisch ist mit seinem Tun in der Offenbarung, identisch auch mit dessen Wirkung”).



maintained between the subject, act and effect in revelation. What does Barth mean by identifying God with action and effects? And, could this not lead to untoward theological consequences?<sup>32</sup> Indeed the theological consequences could be disastrous if we begin with an abstract notion of any of the three. We might, for instance, start with an abstract notion of action and propose that the revealing subject in identity with the act of revealing should be understood in terms of this notion of action. This kind of essentialist actualism could easily reduce God to a totemic principle or an impersonal force. In the same way, equating God with an abstract notion of the effect of revelation has radical implications. This approach reduces God to a way of speaking about subjective transformation or enlightenment. These paths are out-of-bounds for Barth, who with traditional Christian orthodoxy would reject affirmations that identify God with anything that is not the objective, personal and concrete God of the Bible. In order to come to grips with Barth's notion of revelation, therefore, we must heed his words that "the Bible always understands what it calls revelation as a concrete relation to concrete men."<sup>33</sup> Barth's identification of subject, act and being are not the fruit of reflection on general philosophical notions of being and act or cause and effect. As before, these also are intended to be the fruit of reflection on the gift of the knowledge of God. Barth's theology of revelation will remain unintelligible as long as general philosophical presumptions are assumed to be the key either to understanding its motivation or to unlocking its interpretation.

Barth contests that he is attempting to be faithful to the concrete God of the Bible who is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That the revealing Father is one with his act of revelation is nothing more than the confession of John 1: "the Word was God." Since the Word of God, is the speech of God, and because "we shall have to regard God's speech as also God's act,"<sup>34</sup> Jesus Christ, therefore, is God's self-revealing act. The same concrete

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<sup>32</sup> It is my intent here to clarify Barth's notion of revelation, not to defend Barth's doctrine of the Trinity. Along these lines, Barth has been critiqued as flirting with modalism (Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981], 139–144); de-emphasizing intra-trinitarian communion and consequently human participation in it (Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 103–107, 213ff); as well as deriving the doctrine of the trinity analytically from a theory of revelation (William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 388).

<sup>33</sup> CD I/1, 325 (KD I/1, 343, "immer als eine konkrete Beziehung zu konkreten Menschen").

<sup>34</sup> CD I/1, 133 (KD I/1, 137, "Wir werden Gottes Rede auch als Gottes Tat zu verstehen sein").

biblical analysis shapes Barth's conclusion that the Spirit of God is the revealedness of God. That the Revealer and revealing act are one with the effect of that act is the confession that in revelation we are given the Spirit of truth. It is the fellowship of the Spirit that unites us to Christ. This union in the Spirit is the subjective impartation of the revelation of God. The Spirit guarantees for us "personal participation in revelation."<sup>35</sup> Christ is the objective revelation of God and the Spirit is the gift of the subjective realization of that revelation in us: the gift of "faith, knowledge and obedience."<sup>36</sup> The ministry of the Spirit enables a participation in Christ's human knowing of the Father. The gift of the effect of revelation is the gift of God giving himself.

Barth's theology of revelation is plainly at odds with some assumptions that accompany a general philosophical or history-of-religions approach to the question of revelation. It is dissonance with these background assumptions that obscures Barth's position. In the vernacular or "plain sense," *revelation* has to do with bringing to light heretofore hidden information.<sup>37</sup> In its traditionally distinguished forms, special and general, revelation is typically imagined to be a deposit of information or traces of God left for humans to discover and decipher, e.g. Scripture as propositional revelation. I have in mind what Paul Helm calls the "disclosure of truths" in the form of a "straight propositional account."<sup>38</sup> Barth stresses, on the other hand, that revelation is fundamentally personal<sup>39</sup>—the person of Jesus Christ is God's revelation. Revelation is never merely a description or an idea, it is "God's speaking person."<sup>40</sup> A strictly or fundamentally propositional view of Christian revelation would replace intimate, personal knowing with a theoretical, depersonalized abstraction.<sup>41</sup> "For the point of God's speech

<sup>35</sup> CD I/1, 453 (KD I/1, 475, "persönliche Teilnahme an der Offenbarung").

<sup>36</sup> CD I/1, 453 (KD I/1, 475, "Glaube, Erkenntnis, Gehorsam").

<sup>37</sup> See Alan Torrance's penetrating analysis of this in which he notes that importing a general model of revelation "can lead one to postulate a distinction (which too easily becomes a disjunction) between the being of  $S^I$  [the divine subject] and the being and nature of  $x$  [what is revealed]" (*Persons in Communion*, 66).

<sup>38</sup> *The Divine Revelation*, 35.

<sup>39</sup> Barth grants that in revelation we may have to do with facts, but these are not isolated propositions, they are facts that are "created and presented by a person" (CD I/1, 205; KD I/1, 214).

<sup>40</sup> CD I/1, 136–137 (KD I/1, 141).

<sup>41</sup> "But will the truth of revelation submit to such materialisation and depersonalisation? Can one have it in abstraction from the person of Him who reveals it and from the revelatory act of this person in which it is given to other persons to perceive?" (CD I/1, 270; KD I/1, 285). See also the priority of the question

is not to occasion specific thoughts or a specific attitude but through the clarity which God gives us, and which induces both these in us, to bind us to Himself.”<sup>42</sup> The fact, however, that revelation is personal and relational does not mean that it is a strictly numinous, supra-rational and extramental experience with no impact on our minds. “The supremely real and determinative entry of the Word of God into the reality of man”<sup>43</sup> induces and encompasses “specific thoughts.” The personal nature of revelation does not “impl[y] its irrationality.”<sup>44</sup> In the gift of hearing God’s speaking, we are said to be given “very distinct and in themselves clear thoughts regarding what is said to us.”<sup>45</sup> Barth affirms that personal revelation remains rational, verbal, and cognitive.<sup>46</sup> In fact, Barth believes that personal communication is fundamentally rational. “Speech, including God’s speech, is the form in which reason communicates with reason and person with person.”<sup>47</sup> Barth will grant to the common notion of revelation that revelation is indeed intellectually engaging, but not that it is a mere transmission of propositional statements.<sup>48</sup> God makes himself personally known to us in relationship with us by the

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“Who is God in His Revelation?” (*CD I/1*, 297–301; *KD I/1*, 313–317). In chapter 6 we will take a closer look at the distinction between personal and propositional knowing, including the objections of Helm and Wolterstorff.

<sup>42</sup> *CD I/1*, 175 (*KD I/1*, 181–182, “der Sinn der Rede Gottes ist . . . uns an ihn selbst zu binden”).

<sup>43</sup> *CD I/1*, 193 (*KD I/1*, 201, “das höchst reale und bestimmende Eintreten des Wortes Gottes in die Wirklichkeit des Menschen”).

<sup>44</sup> *CD I/1*, 138 (*KD I/1*, 142, “nun doch seine Irrationalität bedeuten”). This affirmation is missed by those who assume that Barth is advocating “irrationalism,” famously by Brand Blanshard at a 1962 gathering of philosophers and theologians at Princeton Seminary and the philosophers in agreement who were noted to have “cheered on so enthusiastically,” *Faith and the Philosophers*, ed. John Hick (London: MacMillan & Co Ltd, 1964), 159–200, 232–233. The thirty-year-old Alvin Plantinga was included in this auspicious gathering though his recorded contribution makes no comment on the debate over Barth.

<sup>45</sup> *CD I/1*, 174 (*KD I/1*, 181, “sehr bestimmte und in sich deutliche Gedanken”).

<sup>46</sup> The personal character of God’s Word is not, then, to be played off against its verbal or spiritual character (*CD I/1*, 138; *KD I/1*, 142).

<sup>47</sup> *CD I/1*, 135 (*KD I/1*, 139, “Rede ist, auch als Rede Gottes, die Form, in der sich Vernunft der Vernunft, Person der Person mitteilt”).

<sup>48</sup> Barth warns against thinking that “propositions or principles are certain in themselves like the supposed axioms of the mathematicians and physicists, and are not rather related to their theme and content, which alone are certain, which they cannot master, by which they must be mastered if they are not to be mere soap-bubbles” (*CD I/1*, 165; *KD I/1*, 171).

gift of communion with the Spirit who is the subject of the knowing relation.<sup>49</sup> It is in this participative communion only, however, that information about God is personally and cognitively enjoyed and properly known.

These comments on the nature of the knowledge of God serve to support the second claim about Barth's theological epistemology: 2) *knowing God is personal, cognitive, participative knowing*. This statement affirms both the objective revelation of God's address to us in Christ and the subjective response of our participation in that knowing by the gift of the Spirit. We have not, however, in these few words removed the mystery of the miracle of revelation; nor, on Barth's view, is it ever possible on our side of the relation to unravel the mystery.

### ***The Hiddenness of God in Revelation***

Some of what Barth has to say about revelation appears to temper, if not contradict, his positive affirmations on the possibility for humans to know God. Although Barth affirms that the speech of God is rational, cognitive and verbal, it is nevertheless indirect and therefore, in its creaturely, secular form, leaves God hidden. Barth claims not only that for us the speech of God remains shrouded in mystery, but that this is *necessarily* so. The notion that God is necessarily hidden in his revelation seems flatly self-contradictory. Given our concern to understand Barth's theological epistemology, it is vital for us to get clear about the way in which he understands God to be both hidden and yet revealed. If Barth is affirming the necessary and absolute unrevealedness of God we will certainly not get far in the dialogue with Plantinga. We have already seen, however, that Barth promotes revelation as a real revealing.<sup>50</sup> It would be difficult to view Barth's constructive approach to revelation as simply a slight-of-hand skepticism. How then are we to resolve this pointed confrontation between revelation and mystery? One possibility is that in God's revelation God is only partially revealed and therefore only partially hidden. We can safely rule this out as an option for Barth. On the contrary, Barth actually seems to assert both that our knowledge of God is "similar to the clarity and certainty

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<sup>49</sup> "To say Holy Spirit in preaching or theology is always to say a final word. For when we do this . . . we are always speaking of the event in which God's Word is not only revealed to man but also believed by him" (*CD I/1*, 182; *KD I/1*, 189).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Alan Torrance's rebuttal of Battista Mondin's charge that Barth's form-content distinction "is heading in the direction of a *credo quia absurdum*" (*Persons in Communion*, 168–176).

with which God knows Himself,”<sup>51</sup> and yet that God remains completely hidden behind an “untearably thick veil.”<sup>52</sup> Barth really is affirming both hiddenness and revealedness to be absolutely and simultaneously true. There is a key difference, however, in the perspective from which both of these claims can be simultaneously made. From above or inside the knowing relation, God is really revealed; but, from below or outside the knowing relation, God is utterly hidden. The stark opposition between these perspectives must be emphasized in order to maintain a narrow path that runs between two lethal theological trip wires. On one side is the error of divinizing the creaturely, on the other side is the error of secularizing the divine, on a third side, which actually connects the other two, is the consequence of negating real divine-to-human revelation.

In the hindsight of faith, we know God to be the holy, infinite, independent, creator fully distinct from his fallen, finite, dependent creatures. As creatures, knowledge must come to us in creaturely form. But the knowledge of God has no human analogy by which it could come to us directly in creaturely form.<sup>53</sup> The divine content of revelation must therefore be communicated indirectly through a creaturely form,<sup>54</sup> but in such a way that the divine content does not become the creaturely form. This means that in terms of the creaturely form alone, God is hidden behind a “wall of secularity.”<sup>55</sup> From outside, this wall is unscalable. This does not mean that the form of the creaturely form is unimportant, only that the nature of its reference to God is such that “the power of this reference does not lie in itself; it lies in that to which it refers.”<sup>56</sup> The creaturely form is a

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<sup>51</sup> CD I/1, 243 (KD I/1, 256, “ähnlich der Gewißheit und Klarheit, in der Gott in seinem Worte sich selber erkennt”).

<sup>52</sup> CD I/1, 168 (KD I/1, 174, “unzerreißbar dichten Schleiers”).

<sup>53</sup> In chapter 6 we will discuss Barth’s rejection of the *analogia entis* in a more detailed discussion of the nature of human knowledge of God.

<sup>54</sup> Barth’s point here is both more severe and yet more optimistic than Calvin’s notion of accommodation. In the famous passage in the *Institutes* (I.13.1), Calvin explains that accommodating to our feebleness (*tenuitati*) God in a certain way lisps (*quodammodo balbutire*) to give us a knowledge of him by stooping down to our level (*longe infra eius altitudinem descendere*). For Barth the creaturely form on its own is not an accommodated, lesser form of revelation, it is utter hiddenness—non-revelation. As an instrument in the hands of the self-revealing action of God, however, this creaturely form becomes the place of the real revelation of God at his full height.

<sup>55</sup> CD I/1, 165 (KD I/1, 171, “Mauer von Welthaftigkeit”).

<sup>56</sup> CD I/1, 197 (KD I/1, 205, “Die Kraft dieses Verweises liegt nicht in ihm selber, sondern in dem, worauf er verweist”).

means by which God chooses to break through to us. The origination of revelation is, however, unidirectional;<sup>57</sup> we cannot use the means to break through to God. God gives himself *in and through* the creaturely form, not *as* the creaturely form. The creaturely form, although it is only form and not content, is nevertheless, indispensable because of our creatureliness. “The secular form without the divine content is not the Word of God and the divine content without the secular form is also not the Word of God.”<sup>58</sup> The “united but not confused” Chalcedonic formula fits exactly.<sup>59</sup> Incarnation is revelation. The creaturely form, or human nature of Christ is united with the divine nature in the person of the Logos. This revelation is established by God uniting himself to an anhypostatic creaturely nature. The human does not become the divine. The creaturely form has no personhood of its own. It is not, on its own, revelation. Outside of the gift of faith, the creaturely form only hides God. This hiddenness is graciously overcome in the miracle of revelation, where God, who remains a mystery in a creaturely form, lifts people up by means of the creaturely form in faith to participate in the knowing relation whereby God knows himself.

The possibility of the personal and cognitive revelation of God is, next to all other acts of human knowing, unreservedly *sui generis*.<sup>60</sup> In every other instance, the object and subject in the knowing relation are both created. Human knowledge of God is necessarily indirect and therefore cannot be penetrated from below. It is not enough that God takes on a creaturely form; because, God does not become transparently visible in the creaturely form. There are two reasons for this opacity: our fallenness and our finitude.<sup>61</sup> Our fallenness means the distortion of our knowledge structures and language for grasping

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<sup>57</sup> Referring to revelation as *unidirectional* means that only by God are we drawn into the knowledge of God, it does not mean that knowing God is somehow *unilateral*—that it fails somehow to be genuine human knowing with genuine human reciprocation.

<sup>58</sup> CD I/1, 175 (KD I/1, 182, “die welthafte Gestalt ohne den göttlichen Gehalt ist nicht das Wort Gottes”).

<sup>59</sup> “The central thrust of the ancient dogma was that the Logos (the second Person of the Holy Trinity) took to Himself human flesh (i.e. a human ‘nature’, complete, whole, and entire) and lived a human life in and through it. The proximity to Barth’s dialectic of veiling and unveiling was obvious. In that God takes to God’s Self a human nature, God veils God’s Self in a creaturely medium” (Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* [Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1995], 327). See also Trevor Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Essays Toward a Reading of His Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 14–17.

<sup>60</sup> CD I/1, 164 (KD I/1, 170).

<sup>61</sup> CD I/1, 167–168 (KD I/1, 173–174).

truth. Our finitude means the lack of any capacity for, or bridge of analogy to, God. Both of these keep us from seeing God through the veil of the creaturely form. In the gracious miracle of revelation, both of these problems are overcome. We are given the eyes of faith to see despite the brokenness of our knowledge structures and language, and we are born across the gulf that separates creator and creature through a participation by the Spirit in the Son's knowledge of the Father. Only God could make God known.

One significant question raised by the miracle of revelation is: is the miracle of revelation a perpetual reality or not? Barth is clear that we cannot assume that it is. Revelation cannot be presupposed, even as a present fulfillment.<sup>62</sup> Barth warns that we do not have at our disposal a "constantly available relationship between God and man."<sup>63</sup> That is not to say that God does not draw us into ongoing relationship, but that the relationship is not made available to us in such a way that it is in our control. This is, for Barth, another affirmation of the hiddenness of God from outside the unidirectional movement from God to us in revelation. We are never left with a capacity that would reverse this direction. This is what Barth is most intent on guarding against. Not even on the basis of the move having already been made from above to below do we have an assurance of our own grasp. The past experience of revelation cannot be allowed to become a postulate in a system whereby we build back to a demonstration of the knowledge of God. Barth rejects the idea of the perpetual availability of revelation because we are never brought into a state where we have hold of the ground of grace. We confess and know God on the basis of the gift of grace alone, but we cannot show how we know. We are not required to interpret Barth to be suggesting that God in his freedom could *not* perpetually give us the gift of faith and personal revelation. Barth's comments on this are geared toward obliterating any confidence that could be placed on our independent perpetual experience, understanding, appropriation, translation, or communication of revelation.

This brings us to an important observation regarding the freedom of God in his revelation. The gift of the knowledge of God is given to us with assurance in the knowing relation, but we are not also given any means whereby we could demonstrate either to ourselves or others that we have been given this knowledge. The question might be put

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<sup>62</sup> *CD* I/1, 261 (*KD* I/1, 275).

<sup>63</sup> Barth argues that to view revelation as a "constantly available relationship" reduces grace to nature (*CD* I/1, 41; *KD* I/1, 40, "kontinuierlich vorfindlichen Beziehung zwischen Gott und Mensch").

this way: can we know that we have true knowledge of God? But stating the question like this might result in a misleading answer from Barth. We have already established that the experience of the Word of God is cognitive. One implication of this is that when we are addressed by God in his revelation we are cognizant of what is happening. In the gift of knowing God we are aware that it is God we are knowing. In other words, in God's self-disclosure, we know that we truly know God. Knowing that we truly know is part of the gift of participating in Christ's knowledge of the Father. The question is misleading, however, if it is assumed that in order to know that we know, we must have some reason to justify our knowledge claim. A justifying reason in the form of some tangible evidence or argument we are not given, according to Barth. The only justification we have is the event of revelation itself.<sup>64</sup> What justifies our knowing that we know God is the fact that God has made himself known and nothing else.<sup>65</sup> All we have to point to as a basis for our knowledge of God is the gift of grace. But this basis, precisely because it is divinely given and "thus withdrawn from our grasp,"<sup>66</sup> is therefore "an assurance with a metal that makes it superior to every other assurance."<sup>67</sup>

This brings us to the third conclusion about Barth's theological epistemology: 3) *knowing God is divinely initiated, self-attesting, grace*. The grace of revelation is God's overcoming our fallenness and finitude. It is initiated from the object of revelation—from above to below. From the outside we cannot break through the creaturely form to see God directly; nor do we have in our being a capacity or analogy for spanning the gulf. Revelation always requires God's action. God's action in the grace of faith attests to the truth of the knowledge of God and allows us to know God through the creaturely form. So God's hiddenness and revealedness are not in contradiction. In fact, if God did not

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<sup>64</sup> Calvin, similarly, says that revelation in Scripture is self-attesting (*αὐτὸπιστον*), it is not subject to rational demonstration but is confirmed by the testimony of the Spirit (*neque demonstrationi et rationibus subiici eam fas esse: quam tamen meretur apud nos certitudinem, Spiritus testimonio consequi*, Institutes, I.7.5). He also observes here the human form serving the disclosure of the divine content (*hominum ministerio, ab ipsissimo Dei ore ad nos fluxisse*).

<sup>65</sup> Barth argues that "self-certainty" must be based only on the "certainty of God" (CD I/1, 196; KD I/1, 204). Barth affirms the same when he writes, "In faith man has and knows and affirms only this possibility of knowledge of God's Word, the possibility which lies in the Word of God itself, has come to him in the Word, and is present to him in the Word" (CD I/1, 224; KD I/1, 236).

<sup>66</sup> CD I/1, 226 (KD I/1, 238, "unserem Zugriff entzogen").

<sup>67</sup> CD I/1, 226 (KD I/1, 238, "eine Sicherheit, die ein Metall in sich trägt, das sie jeder anderen Sicherheit überlegen macht").



take the creaturely form that hides him there would be no means for revealing himself either. "What seems in the first instance an absurd obstacle that God Himself has put in the way is in fact His real way to us."<sup>68</sup> And if our assurance were grounded in anything other than the self-attesting grace of revelation it would be built only on sinking sand.

### ***Revelation as Whole Person Transformation***

We have covered the features of Barth's theology of revelation that are salient for clarifying his from-above-to-below theological epistemology. But before we begin to investigate the implications of these features for the relationship with philosophy, we should first take note of the connection between revelation and personal transformation. Just as the way of knowing God is fundamentally different from the way we know other objects of knowledge, so too is the nature of the knowing itself unlike any other knowledge. We have already touched upon this uniqueness when we looked at Barth's claim that God is not just the object but he is also, particularly as the Spirit, the subject of the knowing. For theological knowledge to be possible, according to Barth, we must be drawn up, by the gift of the Spirit, to participate in the knowing by which God knows himself. God cannot properly be known from a distance. Theological knowing requires that God establish a relationship, a relationship that cannot but be not only cognitively illuminating but also personally transformative. For this reason Barth speaks of God's address as, "the transposing of man into the wholly new state."<sup>69</sup> The knowledge of any object has far reaching and determinative consequences for the knower. We exist in relationship to, though distinct from, the objects of our knowledge both past and present. Barth provisionally defines knowledge as "the confirmation of human acquaintance with an object whereby its truth becomes a determination of the existence of the man who has the knowledge."<sup>70</sup> If this is so for ordinary objects, then how much more significant (and

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<sup>68</sup> CD I/1, 168 (KD I/1, 175, "Was zunächst wie ein absurdes Hindernis erscheint, daß Gott sich selbst in dem Weg legt, das eben ist sein wirklicher . . . Weg zu uns").

<sup>69</sup> CD I/1, 152 (KD I/1, 158, "die Versetzung des Menschen in den ganz neuen Stand").

<sup>70</sup> CD I/1, 198 (KD I/1, 206, "diejenige Bewährung menschlichen Wissens um einen Gegenstand, durch den sein Wahrsein zu einer Bestimmung der Existenz des erkennenden Menschen wird"). Barth is clear that no general definition of knowledge can be imposed or presumed. Definitions must be left open to correction "in the light of the object concerned" (CD I/1, 190; KD I/1, 197).

radically different) must the determination of the existence of the knower be in the human acquaintance with God.

The impact of the Word of God is on all human faculties, not “intellect alone, yet at any rate the intellect also and not last of all.”<sup>71</sup> Revelation never fails to be cognitive, but “the determination of human existence by God’s Word can be understood just as much as a determination of feeling, will, or intellect.”<sup>72</sup> “*Πίστις* says more than *γνώσις*, but in all circumstances it says *γνώσις* too.”<sup>73</sup> It is therefore the whole person who is impacted by this revelation. We have already established that the barrier of our fallenness is overcome in revelation. The impact on the whole person in the experience of knowing God is a turning of our rebellion against God and a being brought into conformity with God. “To have experience of God’s Word is to yield to its supremacy.”<sup>74</sup> “It comes . . . in such a way as to bend man, and indeed his conscience and will no less than his intellect and feeling. It does not break him; it really bends him, brings him into conformity with itself.”<sup>75</sup> Every aspect of who we are is touched by revelation. Revelation is made possible by the gift of faith, which is required for those without eyes to be able to see Him.<sup>76</sup> But this gift and the seeing imply a reconstitution of our minds, the submission of our wills and the transformation of our being.<sup>77</sup>

We must be cautious, nevertheless, about the conclusions drawn from the insistence that revelation involves whole person transformation. There are at least three faulty inferences that must be avoided: Firstly, the consequence of personal transformation must never be read backwards as a condition of revelation. Repentance and obedience are given with the gift of faith, they are not a pre-requisite for revelation. Barth leaves no

<sup>71</sup> CD I/1, 205 (KD I/1, 214, “nicht nur den Intellekt, aber jedenfalls auch und nicht zuletzt den Intellekt”).

<sup>72</sup> CD I/1, 204 (KD I/1, 213, “ebensowohl als eine Gefühls- wie als eines Willens- wie als eine Intellektsbestimmung verstanden werden”).

<sup>73</sup> CD I/1, 229 (KD I/1, 241, “*Πίστις* sagt mehr als *γνώσις*, es sagt aber auch und unter allen Umständen auch *γνώσις*”).

<sup>74</sup> CD I/1, 206 (KD I/1, 215, “Erfahrung vom Worte Gottes haben heißt zurückweichen vor seiner Überlegenheit”).

<sup>75</sup> CD I/1, 206 (KD I/1, 215, “es kommt . . . so, daß es den Menschen und zwar sein Gewissen und seinen Willen ebenso wie seinen Intellekt und sein Gefühl beugt—nicht zerbricht, aber wirklich beugt, in eine Konformität mit sich selber bringt”).

<sup>76</sup> CD I/1, 223 (KD I/1, 234).

<sup>77</sup> Barth understands the New Testament notion of repentance (*μετανοεῖν*) to refer not only to a transformation of the mind, but more comprehensively to death and rebirth (CD I/1, 387; KD I/1, 408).

doubt that, in his view, the Word of God is spoken in “unconditional freedom.”<sup>78</sup> Secondly, following from the first, God is free to reveal Himself by the Spirit in Christ to all people. The free revelatory work of the Spirit is not confined to the institutional church or only to those who have “professed Christ.” Thirdly, following from the second, the personal transformation involved in revelation does not create a privileged class of God-knowers. The transformation that comes with revelation neither revives nor implants an independent capacity for knowing God. While it is true that “a new, regenerate man will arise” it is also true that he “does not possess this regenerate man.”<sup>79</sup> There is no sense in which one is transformed to stand as a new creature on one’s own, as if it were possible to have direct access to the knowledge of God outside of communion with God freely established by God.<sup>80</sup> Barth seems most anxious to dispel this erroneous conclusion because of its seductive appeal in the history of theology.<sup>81</sup> To grant that there could be a human faculty which enables independent knowing of God is to ignore all that Barth believes we discover about the nature of revelation in the gift of revelation. Our dependence on God’s breaking through from above to below is removed if there is another more direct channel of knowing that is under our control. For Barth, the God we know to be God in his revelation could not be known in any other way.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, it is impossible to have any assurance in a knowledge of God delivered by a human faculty. This move would attempt to ground faith in a human source, thus dangling it over the abyss of uncertainty and opening the door to the diabolical illusion of a way of theological knowing from below to above.

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<sup>78</sup> CD I/1, 157 (KD I/1, 164, “unbedingte Freiheit”).

<sup>79</sup> CD I/1, 222 (KD I/1, 311, “Ein neuer, ein wiedergeborener Mensch wird . . . dastehen” “nicht diesen neugeborenen Menschen besitzen”).

<sup>80</sup> In *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 42–43, Ronald Thiemann argues that Barth “denies us our humanity” by stipulating that God is only known when the human subject is given a participation in God’s self-knowing. He suggests that the human subject is discounted because the human is not the one doing the knowing in that relation. Thiemann fails to consider the possibility of a real human participation in Christ’s human knowing of the Father. This charge ignores Barth’s strong affirmation of humanity inherent in the participation by which the human subject genuinely, humanly knows God.

<sup>81</sup> We will meet these concerns particularly in chapter 5 where we look at what room Barth and Plantinga make for natural theology.

<sup>82</sup> “The revelation attested in [Scripture] refuses to be understood as any sort of revelation alongside which there are or may be others” (CD I/1, 295; KD I/1, 311).

The personal, cognitive, self-attesting, divinely initiated knowledge of God can never be conceived of as anything other than gift freely given. Barth strictly maintains that nothing could merit or deliver independent access to the knowledge of God. Nevertheless, revelation could not involve a person's participation by the Spirit in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, without also transforming that person. This transformation involves the reconstitution of mind and will such that the knower is brought into conformity with God, a transformation that is maintained only in the knowing relation effected by the Spirit in the gift of faith. This is, of course, not to say that personal transformation is comprehensive and instantaneous, though the ultimate goal of reconciliation is the regeneration of the whole person. It is with these provisos that the forth observation about Karl Barth's theological epistemology should be understood: *4) knowing God effects a personal transformation in conformity with God.*

## **Conclusion**

In this first chapter I have sought to clarify the most important implications of Barth's theology of revelation for understanding his theological epistemology. We have summarized these implications into four statements that address his understanding of the order, nature, direction and impact of theological knowing. With this positive groundwork laid, we are now ready to investigate how Barth's uncompromising from-above foundationalism shapes his view of the role and limits of philosophy for theology.

## 2

**BARTH'S ENGAGEMENT WITH PHILOSOPHY:  
A THEO-FOUNDATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY**

While the conclusions of Barth's theology of revelation do indeed curtail the free-reign of philosophy over theology, they hardly amount to an all-out ban. The intent of this second chapter is to determine what Karl Barth understands to be the primary theological boundaries for properly functioning philosophy in the service of theology, and thereby to correct the misunderstanding that Barth's position is one of blanket interdiction and isolation. We will explore the implications of Barth's theological epistemology to grasp his primary concerns with what he takes in fact to be the inevitable use of philosophy in the theological task.

Our approach will focus on a selection of Barth's work where he comments extensively on the relationship between philosophy and theology. With the exception of an essay penned for his brother Heinrich's seventieth birthday *Festschrift* in 1960, the material we will consider is taken primarily from *KD* I/1 and material from Barth's time just prior, in Göttingen and Münster. In this period, Barth clarifies theology's independent starting point and the proper relationship of philosophical assumptions and methods to the theological task.<sup>1</sup> We will begin with a consideration of some explicit statements Barth

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<sup>1</sup> The dubious suggestion of Hans Urs von Balthasar that Barth's "final emancipation from the shackles of philosophy" did not come until 1930 after "a struggle, that lasted nearly ten years" should not deter us from concluding that the positions Barth enunciates during the Göttingen and Münster years constitute

makes concerning philosophy and how it differs from theology. This discussion will establish that it is not philosophy *per se* that Barth rejects, but the way in which philosophy typically operates. Then we will look at Barth's censure of the uncritical acceptance in theology of modernist philosophical presuppositions. Here we will nuance Barth's response to a collection of philosophical assumptions that are rarely distinguished in theological literature. Finally, we will highlight a representative instance of Barth's reflections on philosophy in relationship to theology. This will enable us to see that the criterion for evaluating the usefulness of philosophical assumptions and methods in the service of theology is the same criterion by which theology itself is evaluated, namely, the revelation of God. Our modest goal is to understand how Barth's convictions about the givenness of divine self-revelation sets the priorities for constructive theological engagement with philosophy.

### **Why Theology is Not Philosophy**

The suggestion that Barth's theology has 'little use for philosophy' is in most respects untenable. From the 1920s onward, Barth's position did not change. Theology cannot avoid philosophy because theology is done in philosophy's own arena. "If we open our mouths, we find ourselves in the province of philosophy."<sup>2</sup> In fact, Barth begins his

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his mature position. The material from 1932 and 1960 diverges in no way from the earlier material we will discuss. The English translation of Balthasar here tries to soften the claim by opting for "final emancipation" and mysteriously inserting "a gradual process, indeed a struggle." Referring to what he finds to be Barth's second turning point, Balthasar writes, "Der zweite [Wendepunkt] ist der Endpunkt der Befreiung aus den Schlacken der Philosophie, um zu einer echten, selbständigen Theologie zu gelangen; er liegt, nach einem fast zehnjährigen Ringen um diese Befreiung, ungefähr 1930" (*Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung Seiner Theologie* [Köln: J. Hegner, 1951], 101, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992], 93).

<sup>2</sup> From a lecture given at the University of Utrecht in 1935, *Credo: A Presentation of the Chief Problems of Dogmatics with Reference to the Apostles' Creed*, trans. J. Strathearn McNab (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), 183 (*Credo: Die Hauptprobleme der Dogmatik dargestellt im Anschluß an das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis* [München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1935], 158, "Wenn wir den Mund auftun, so befinden wir uns im Bereich der Philosophie"). Similarly, in 1928, Barth says that theology is done in the domain (*das Gebiet*) of philosophical reflection (*EI*, 32; *Eet*, 21). In 1929, Barth writes that theology works within the framework (*im Raum*) of philosophy (*SIT*, 57; *SITet*, 27). And, in 1960, Barth places theologians and philosophers in the same sphere (*Raum*) confronted by common problems (*gemeinsamen Probleme*), taking different paths (*PTet*, 80; *PT*, 94).

*Church Dogmatics* with the observation that there is only a pragmatic justification for distinguishing theology from philosophy. Philosophy is not *necessarily* “secular or pagan.” “There might be such a thing as *philosophia christiana*.”<sup>3</sup> He later expands on this suggestion, by proposing the possibility of a Christian philosopher who is in fact a “Krypto-Theologe.”<sup>4</sup> These and other positive statements about philosophy and its relationship to theology require that any explanation of Barth’s much vaunted aversion to philosophy must retain for philosophy some rightful place. It must be stressed that Barth’s strict cautions about philosophy are not aimed at philosophy “in principal”<sup>5</sup> but only at the non-Christian stance that philosophy has in fact adopted. There is no reason why there could not be a Christian philosophy, but the fact is “there never has actually been a *philosophia christiana*, for if it was *philosophia* it was not *christiana*, and if it was *christiana* it was not *philosophia*.”<sup>6</sup> It is philosophy’s abandoning of the theological task and way of knowing that has occasioned the need for theology as a stop gap measure.<sup>7</sup>

Both theology and philosophy, and the other sciences for that matter, are human concerns to know the truth that theology knows to be the Truth which has made itself known as the ground of all other being and truth. As fellow-human beings engaged in this enterprise, the philosopher and theologian are companions. Barth says they face “common difficult tasks.”<sup>8</sup> But it is exactly this commonality that gives rise to a turf-war-like confrontation. It is the *way* in which philosophy approaches the Truth that has provoked theology to take its artificial independent stand. The theological way of knowing is “motivated wholly by the power of the primordial movement from above to below. The theologian stands and falls with this sequence, in fact, with its irreversibility.”<sup>9</sup> It is significant to note that Barth sees the movement from below to above as legitimate and important, but only as a secondary movement from the first

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<sup>3</sup> CD I/1, 5 (KD I/1, 4, “nicht ‘profan’, nicht heidnisch sein” . . . “Sie könnte *philosophia christiana* sein”).

<sup>4</sup> PT, 98–99 (PTet, 85–86).

<sup>5</sup> CD I/1, 5 (KD I/1, 3, “als prinzipiell”).

<sup>6</sup> CD I/1, 6 (KD I/1, 4, “*Philosophia christiana* ist faktisch noch nie Wirklichkeit gewesen. . .”).

<sup>7</sup> It is “unfortunate that the question of the truth of talk about God should be handled as a question apart by a special faculty” (CD I/1, 5; KD I/1, 3, “Die Behandlung der Frage nach der Wahrheit der Rede von Gott als Spezialfrage einer besonderen Fakultät ist eine Mißlichkeit”).

<sup>8</sup> PTet, 80 (PT, 94, “gemeinsamen Probleme”).

<sup>9</sup> PTet, 84–85 (PT, 98, “die ganz allein durch die Kraft der ursprünglichen Bewegung von oben nach unten motiviert. . . Der Theologe steht un fällt mit dieser Folge, und zwar mit ihrer Unumkehrbarkeit”).

movement that is irreversibly from above to below.<sup>10</sup> The *faux pas* of philosophy has been to reverse this order, believing that it has started from below with creation and the light of independent human reason. If indeed there is any consideration for the Creator, it is made in philosophy on the basis of the creation. In so doing philosophy judges according to “alien principles”<sup>11</sup> rather than theology’s first and final criterion, Jesus Christ, the revelation of God.

The distinction between philosophy and theology, therefore, must be carefully drawn. Barth identifies two strategies that must be rejected. The first is to distinguish theology as a special off-shoot of philosophy submitting to same general criteria of evaluation. This is the strategy of *apologetics* as Barth uses the term—“the attempt to establish and justify theological thinking in the context of philosophical, or, more generally and precisely, nontheological thinking.”<sup>12</sup> The second strategy, connected to the first, is “the method of isolation.”<sup>13</sup> Theology is distinguished as the enlightened and now independent philosophy. There are, however, two reasons why theology cannot assert a special superiority to philosophy. Firstly, Barth stresses that “Just as well and just as badly as philosophy, theology is a human science.”<sup>14</sup> It has no special super-human access to the Truth by which to demonstrate its truth. Secondly, “all truth is enclosed in God’s Word.”<sup>15</sup> There is no special preserve of *theological* truth that is by nature hidden from philosophy. In fact, a philosophy which “has the hearing of the Word of God as its presupposition” would be an “equal partner” to theology.<sup>16</sup> Philosophy may be *Christian* philosophy and theology *Christian* theology to the extent that each is aligned with the Truth. Such philosophy would “speak very differently but will not in fact have anything

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<sup>10</sup> Barth even suggests that the priority and attention philosophy gives to creation could serve to remind theology of the importance of humanity and the world, which being relegated to a secondary concern are actually thereby exalted (*PTet*, 84, 92–93; *PT*, 98, 104–105).

<sup>11</sup> *CD* I/1, 6 (*KD* I/1, 4, “fremden Prinzipien”).

<sup>12</sup> *Eet*, 21 (*EI*, 33, “der Versuch einer Begründung und Rechtfertigung des theologischen im Rahmen des philosophischen oder—allgemeiner und bezeichnender—des nichttheologischen”).

<sup>13</sup> *Eet*, 24 (*EI*, 38, “die Methode der *Isolierung*”).

<sup>14</sup> *Eet*, 34 (*EI*, 54, “Theologie ist so gut und so schlimm wie Philosophie eine Menschliche Wissenschaft.”).

<sup>15</sup> *Eet*, 27 (*EI*, 42, “alle Wahrheit im Worte Gottes beschlossen ist. . .”).

<sup>16</sup> *Eet*, 23 (*EI*, 42, “Eine Philosophie . . . das Hören des Wortes Gottes zur Voraussetzung hat” . . . “der Theologie als ebenbürtiger Gegenspieler an die Seite treten”).



different to say.”<sup>17</sup> For this reason any distinction between philosophy and theology is “only a relative and methodological but not material antithesis.”<sup>18</sup>

Barth's aversion to philosophy is not, therefore, an interdiction on the language, conceptions or questions of philosophy; these are all fair game for the theologian and part of what it means that theology is inevitably done in the overlapping *Raum der Philosophie*. The difference is that theology stands in an orientation acknowledging the primacy of God's self-revelation for the understanding and appropriation of everything with which it and philosophy share an interest. It is not the realm of philosophy that Barth objects to, that would be to cut theology off from its own turf. It is the anti-theological orientation of philosophy that requires vigorous resistance. Bruce McCormack speaks to this difference when he clarifies what it means for Barth to be “anti-metaphysical.” What Barth objects to is the “order of knowing” in classical metaphysics from below, “extrapolating from observed phenomena.” But this rejection of the metaphysical way “does not entail the bracketing-off of particular regions of discourse from discussion in an a priori fashion.”<sup>19</sup> The proposal that Barth has ‘little use for philosophy’ is only accurate if applied to the historic neglect philosophy has shown for the theological task and way of knowing. This neglect has created the need for “the separate existence of theology” as an “emergency measure.”<sup>20</sup>

The charge that Barth's theological epistemology is finally anti-philosophical and possibly even irrational<sup>21</sup> is one that Barth himself addressed. This critique has often come packaged with the “neo-orthodox” designation.<sup>22</sup> The implication is that Barth

<sup>17</sup> *Eet*, 33 (*EI*, 54, “zwar dasselbe ganz anders, aber nicht etwas Anderes dazu zu sagen”).

<sup>18</sup> *Eet*, 30 (*EI*, 47, “nur ein relativer, methodischer, nicht aber sachlicher Gegensatz”). There is a significant translation error here where “theological” stands in place of the original “philosophischen,” obscuring entirely the point of this sentence.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1995), 246.

<sup>20</sup> *CD I/1*, 7 (*KD I/1*, 5, “Die Sonderexistenz der Theologie bedeutet die Notmaßnahme. . .”).

<sup>21</sup> Pope Benedict XVI has called Barth's position the “amputation of reason” (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004], 139).

<sup>22</sup> Often the two are conflated, as in “Karl Barth's anti-philosophical neo-orthodoxy” (Herbert Spiegelberg and Karl Schuhmann, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, 3rd rev. ed. [Hague: Nijhoff, 1982], 430). Bruce McCormack challenges the von Balthasarian thesis of a later non-dialectical Barth that may have bolstered the ‘neo-orthodox’ reading of Barth which “remains the predominant one in the English-speaking world” (*Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 24–25).

champions a return to a pre-modern, pre-critical era of positive orthodoxy, choosing to remain naïve by ignoring the epistemological questions raised by modernity. The notion that Barth was advocating a pre-modern or pre-scientific theology began several years before the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, and is addressed directly by Barth in correspondence with Adolf von Harnack.<sup>23</sup> Barth had challenged what Harnack would call “contemporary scientific theology,”<sup>24</sup> which marked its origins from the Enlightenment.<sup>25</sup> Harnack was clear that to abandon this Enlightenment project was, in his view, to abandon “the only possible way of grasping the object epistemologically.”<sup>26</sup> He advanced the notion that “historical knowledge and critical reflection” were the conduits for a proper human reception of revelation.<sup>27</sup> In response, Barth catalogs and rejects those human grounds that had been proposed to fulfill the Enlightenment’s foundationalist requirements. He rejects both those subjective grounds that Harnack also rejects, as well as those foundations sacred to Harnack.<sup>28</sup> Barth, however, protests Harnack’s conclusion that Barth is, on this account, a despiser of reason and science. In a move that only serves to confirm Harnack’s suspicions, Barth appeals to Luther and Paul.<sup>29</sup> This leads Harnack to suspect that Barth simply wishes to recast an uncritical, pre-modern theology. However, and this is the salient point, Barth categorically rejects any simple ‘repristination’ of classical or pre-Enlightenment theology. He sees the value of reclaiming for theology the “idea of a determinative *object*” unconstrained by “the determinate character of the *method*.”<sup>30</sup> But he is resolute in the face of the question of “repristinating a classical theological train of thought” that, as theologians, “we must think *in our time for our time*.”<sup>31</sup> The idea that Barth advocates at any stage a positive

<sup>23</sup> Harnack addressed his original grievances to “the despisers of scientific theology,” of which Barth was foremost in his estimation (*BHet*, 29; *BH*, 7).

<sup>24</sup> *BHet*, 36 (*BH*, 14, “wissenschaftlichen Theologie der Gegenwart”).

<sup>25</sup> *BHet*, 31 (*BH*, 9).

<sup>26</sup> *BHet*, 36 (*BH*, 14, “die einzige mögliche Weise, sich des Gegenstandes erkenntnismäßig zu bemächtigen”).

<sup>27</sup> *BHet*, 29 (*BH*, 7, “geschichtliches Wissen und kritisches Nachdenken”).

<sup>28</sup> “‘Inner openness, heuristic knowledge, experience, heart’ and the like on the one hand and ‘historical knowledge and critical reflection’ on the other. . .” (*BHet*, 32; *BH*, 10).

<sup>29</sup> *BHet*, 38 (*BH*, 16).

<sup>30</sup> *BHet*, 41–42 (*BH*, 20, “der Begriff eines maßgeblichen *Gegenstandes* . . . Maßgeblichkeit der *Methode*”).

<sup>31</sup> *BHet*, 41–42 (*BH*, 19–20, “Repristinieren eines klassischen theologischen Gedankenganges,” . . . “wir *in unserer Zeit für unsere Zeit* zu denken haben”).

neo-orthodoxy that is uncritical with respect to epistemological problems is indefensible even on a surface reading. Barth recognized that a theology which thinks in and for its time would have to take seriously the question of theology's way and ground of knowledge; and, he does just that by giving this very question pride of place in *CD I/1*. Despite Barth's clear display of critical appreciation for the question Harnack still only saw in Barth an unscientific notion of revelation teetering "between absolute religious scepticism and naive biblicism."<sup>32</sup> Harnack could not fathom the validity of a starting point that grasps the knower but is not grasped *by* the knower independent of the given knowing relation. Harnack's commitment to the exclusive rationality of the way of knowing from below to above forces his conclusion that Barth was rejecting critical thought *en masse*.

Harnack's difficulties with Barth are similar to those of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Like Harnack, Pannenberg determines that Barth's rejection of an earth-bound scientific epistemology must leave Barth hopelessly mired in subjectivism.<sup>33</sup> Pannenberg believes that if human reason and experience are subjugated, only two options remain: subjectivism and fideism. In explicit agreement with the Enlightenment, Pannenberg states that "a 'positive' theology of revelation which does not depend on rational argument can rely only on a subjective act of will or an irrational venture of faith."<sup>34</sup> It is clear, moreover, that for Pannenberg these two alternatives collapse into each other. Both are an indication of a wholly arbitrary and irrational positivism that stifles intersubjective dialogue.<sup>35</sup> Neither Pannenberg nor Harnack could understand Barth's "from above" as anything other than making an arbitrary human start. For this reason, Pannenberg sees rejecting Barth's "from above" as crucial for theology "if it does not want to fall into the hopeless and, what is more, self-inflicted isolation of a higher *glossolalia*, and lead the whole church into this blind alley."<sup>36</sup> But this conclusion only follows if one rules out *a priori* that God has acted to give himself in Jesus Christ by the Spirit as the ground of

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<sup>32</sup> *BHet*, 53 (*BH*, 31, "zwischen dem absoluten religiösen Skeptizismus und dem naiven Biblizismus").

<sup>33</sup> Harnack assumes that if the ground is not "historical knowledge" (*geschichtliches Wissen*) then the basis must be in the individual's "subjective experience" (*BHet*, 29; *BH*, 7).

<sup>34</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 273.

<sup>35</sup> Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 274.

<sup>36</sup> Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology; Collected Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), II, 189–190.

theological knowing. This *a priori* ban on the givenness of divine self-revelation is the arbitrary assumption driving Pannenberg's conclusions. He writes, "Barth's apparently so lofty objectivity about God and God's word turns out to rest on no more than the irrational subjectivity of a venture of faith with no justification outside itself."<sup>37</sup> But dependence on faith becomes fideistic in Pannenberg's sense only if that faith is an arbitrary human choice. The tables turn dramatically if that faith is the gift of divine self-revelation. Barth would agree that it has no justification outside itself. But what justification could be more secure than God's own self-attestation? Far from fideistic, this alternative, invisible to Pannenberg and Harnack, offers what Barth would see as the only escape possible from the ghettos of human reason.<sup>38</sup>

For those who would presume that cognitive human knowledge of God could not be given from above, Barth's rejection of the from-below way of philosophical knowing is patently irrational, and amounts to an uncritical and naïve wholesale rejection of philosophical thought. For Barth, however, the distinction between philosophy and theology is only necessary to preserve (against this mindset) a from-above, theological way of knowing. In no way does this require a retreat on the part of theology from the realm of philosophy. On the contrary, it is this order of knowing that motivates a critical awareness of and response to the language, concepts and questions raised by philosophy.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Contesting the Ontological Presupposition of the Enlightenment***

Our focus thus far on Barth's theological epistemology recognizes that the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* is, above all else, Barth's attempt to elucidate and defend the way of knowledge followed in theology. He famously renounces traditional post-Enlightenment prolegomena, operating as a philosophic preamble to theology, undertaken in an attempt to establish the noetic grounds, scientific character and academic legitimacy

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<sup>37</sup> Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 273.

<sup>38</sup> I take a closer look at whether and in what sense Barth may be considered a fideist in "Does Contemporary Theology Require a Postfoundationalist Way of Knowing?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 3 (2007): 16–19.

<sup>39</sup> Barth even grants that "it is quite right . . . that an education in the arts and a familiarity with the thinking of the philosopher, psychologist, historian, aesthetician, etc., should be demanded of the dogmatician or the theologian" (*CD* I/1, 283; *KD* I/1, 300). Though this familiarity is not what makes one a theologian.

of theology.<sup>40</sup> In so doing, Barth was making a break with core epistemological assumptions of modernity's *Enlightenment project*. The question could be raised whether the reading of Barth being advanced here is at odds with the received opinion that Barth stands the Enlightenment on its head by reversing the priorities of epistemology and ontology that were themselves reversed by Descartes.<sup>41</sup> Is not Barth's real priority ontology rather than epistemology? Though our focus has been on understanding Barth's theological epistemology we have already seen that God in God's self-revealing action precedes ontologically and makes possible theological knowing. Conceding priority to the question of theology's way and ground of knowledge does not mean that Barth allows the traditional, post-Enlightenment, attending epistemological assumptions to go unquestioned. Conceding priority to the question does not mean that Barth allows the question itself to establish the terms of the debate or condition its outcome. It is in fact the ontological priority of the object of theological knowing that provides the epistemic basis for theology.

Barth saw that, despite all appearances, Enlightenment modernism begins with its own ungrounded ontological assumption.<sup>42</sup> This presumption was an optimism about the constitution and capacity of unassisted human reason which provides the basis for knowing God from-below. What follows here is an analysis of how Barth's insistence on the priority of God's self-revelation leads to his dismantling of the Enlightenment

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<sup>40</sup> As Eberhard Busch notes: "The dogmatics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century understood the 'prolegomena' with which it began as a preamble addressing the general human and human-religious presuppositions which would make a 'doctrine of faith' possible" (Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology*, eds. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 42). For Barth "the prefix *pro* in prolegomena is to be understood loosely to signify the first part of dogmatics rather than that which is prior to it" (*CD* I/1, 42; *KD* I/1, 41). Nancy Murphy provides a concise overview of the way in which theology after Descartes, both conservative and liberal, acquiesced to the general philosophical requirements of foundationalism (Nancy Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda*, Rockwell Lecture Series [Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996], 11–35).

<sup>41</sup> E.g., "what characterizes the modernity which is the target of Barth's critique? The first is the inversion of the order of being and knowing, of ontology or metaphysics and epistemology. In pre-modern times, the question of the being (or essence) of something had primacy over the question of how it can be known" (Christoph Schwöbel, "Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John B. Webster [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 29).

<sup>42</sup> "This nexus of problems, however, is that of an ontology, and since Descartes. . ." (*CD* I/1, 36; *KD* I/1, 35–36).

assumptions. The question, as Barth puts it in *CD I/1*, is: what is the “particular way of knowledge taken in dogmatics”?<sup>43</sup> Originating with Descartes, and extending through Locke, Kant, Schleiermacher, Harnack and many others, this question came packaged with a least three constraining assumptions about its answer:

1. The *obligation assumption*: An explanation or an account of the way of theological knowledge is an obligation upon which the legitimacy of the theological knowledge claim rests.
2. The *general starting-point assumption*: An account of the way of theological knowing must stem from a general epistemology that grounds all knowing or all metaphysical claims.
3. The *evidentialist foundationalist assumption*: The way of theological knowledge must be anchored in trustworthy and readily accessible grounds.

These three assumptions are related and given in order of increasing specificity. The first assumes an obligation to give an account; the second defines the direction that must be taken in fulfilling that obligation; and, the third stipulates the rules that must be obeyed while following the defined direction in fulfillment of the obligation.<sup>44</sup> Barth was not willing to give any of these attending assumptions a free pass.

### *The Obligation Assumption*

Firstly, Barth rejects the notion that theology is obligated to give a reckoning of its particular theological way of knowing. In fact, he does not grant, *as an initial assumption*, that giving such an account is even possible. He does resolve retrospectively that it is

<sup>43</sup> *CD I/1*, 25 (*KD I/1*, 24, “den besonderen Erkenntnisweg, der in der Dogmatik begangen werden”).

<sup>44</sup> This parsing of the assumptions of Enlightenment modernism can be mapped to the elements of Plantinga's ‘classical package’ (*WCB*, 82). The *obligation assumption* corresponds to the duty of *classical deontologism*; the *evidentialist foundationalist assumption* corresponds to both *classical evidentialism* and *classical foundationalism*. The *general starting-point assumption* is implied in most versions of *classical foundationalism*.

possible to give an account, but he refuses to grant it as a requirement for theology. It is helpful to recall from our discussion in chapter 1 that for Barth the principles of theological knowing are only known in reflection on the gift of the knowledge of God. Providing an account of how the knowledge of God becomes a human possibility cannot be a required first-move, *prior* to reflecting on the actually given knowledge of God. In fact, Barth believed, that it did not necessarily undermine the scientific character of theology if it had no prolegomena whatsoever.<sup>45</sup> “Das *Ab esse ad posse valet consequentia* könnte ihre Rechtfertigung sein.”<sup>46</sup> It could be sufficient to note that beginning with reflection on the fact of the *esse* of the knowledge of God renders its *posse* a foregone conclusion requiring no account. So the possibility of theological knowing was a valid assumption, not on the basis of a foregoing confidence in human noetic capacity, but only as *nachdenken* (reflection, lit. thinking after) on an already given reality.

Similarly, Barth only acknowledges retrospectively an obligation to give an account of the way of theological knowing. The obligation is seen in the light of an already given knowledge, it therefore cannot be understood as a foregoing obligation to establish the grounds for theological knowing. Granting an obligation as an initial assumption would be to suggest that one is required, or duty bound, to produce an account in order to have a right to the belief.<sup>47</sup> In Barth's view, it is only in accepting its designation as a *science* that theology recognizes an obligation to “submit to itself, i.e., everyone who has a share in it, an account regarding this path of knowledge.”<sup>48</sup> What is clear here is that the knowledge is already granted. Never is the knowledge itself contingent upon fulfilling the obligation. Barth provides an account of theological knowing without granting the assumed obligation.

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<sup>45</sup> “It cannot be taken for granted that this question can be explicitly raised and answered, and therefore that there can be such a thing as dogmatic prolegomena. . . The lack of prolegomena, or at least of extensive prolegomena, might well indicate, not a naive attitude, but one which is scientifically mature and well-considered. Nor need such an attitude rest on an illusion. It might well have a solid basis in the simplicity of truth, in supreme scientific soundness” (CD I/1, 25; KD I/1, 24).

<sup>46</sup> KD I/1, 24 (CD I/1, 25).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Plantinga on ‘classical deontologism’ in *WCB*, 86.

<sup>48</sup> CD I/1, 275 (KD I/1, 291, “. . . sie sich selbst, d. h. aber jedermann, der an ihrem Problem beteiligt ist, über diesen ihren Erkenntnisweg Rechenschaft abzulegen hat”); also see CD I/1, 8 (KD I/1, 6).

### *The General Starting-Point Assumption*

The *general starting-point* and *evidentialist foundationalist* assumptions drew Barth's sharpest attacks. To grant these assumptions would be to commit to a foolishly optimistic and hopelessly insecure theology *von unten*. Unlike the first assumption, these two assumptions cannot be affirmed even after-the-fact.<sup>49</sup> Barth has been charged with naïveté for suggesting that theology finds its noetic grounds in the object of theology itself and not in a general epistemology with indubitable, accessible foundations.<sup>50</sup> This charge cannot be sustained, however, as Barth demonstrates time and again that he is fully aware of the problems, issues and various alternatives in play. Moreover, he launches the counter charge that the real naïveté is displayed by those who uncritically accept these packaged assumptions.<sup>51</sup>

Regarding the *general starting-point assumption*, Barth was clearly not the first to reject the requirement that the way of knowing in theology must be grounded in a general epistemology. It can and has been argued that Barth was following along in the footsteps of Albrecht Ritschl and Barth's Marburg professor Wilhelm Herrmann.<sup>52</sup> Both Ritschl and Herrmann sought independent epistemological footing for theology that would protect its scientific character while keeping it epistemically differentiated from philosophy. It will be helpful in clarifying the dissent that Barth was registering with the Enlightenment project to briefly examine to what extent he was or was not simply

<sup>49</sup> Barth does not believe it is possible, even retrospectively to "deduce any independent, generally true insights that are different from God's Word and hence lead up to it" (CD I/1, 131; KD I/1, 135).

<sup>50</sup> Bultmann accuses Barth of having "failed to enter into debate with modern philosophy and naively adopted the older ontology from patristic and scholastic dogmatics" (*Karl Barth-Rudolf Bultmann Letters, 1922–1966*, eds. Bernd Jaspert and G. W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 38). Harnack sees in Barth's unscientific notion of revelation a teetering between "absolute religious scepticism and naive biblicism" (*BHet*, 53; *BH*, 31). Harnack's critique is aimed at Barth's failure to meet the second assumption. Barth's account of theological knowing is ailing because it is not subsumable "under one generic concept" (*unter einem Gattungsbegriff*) and is therefore not scientific. The accusation that Barth heralds an uncritical neo-orthodoxy is in this same vein.

<sup>51</sup> "The confidence of the Enlightenment in the right and the power of rational thought was naïve, untested and therefore unsecured, stuck fast in half-truths and open to all kinds of counter-blows" (*Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background & History* [London: S.C.M. Press, 1972], 394).

<sup>52</sup> Simon Fisher argues that in Barth's early writings he "appears as an authentic, though sometimes critical, follower of Ritschl and Herrmann" (*Revelatory Positivism?: Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988], 171).



reiterating the positions of Ritschl and Herrmann. We will look at Ritschl in connection with the *general starting-point assumption*, and Herrmann in connection with the *evidentialist foundationalist assumption*.

Like Barth, Ritschl rejects the possibility that the way of knowing in theology can be anchored in a general epistemology that serves as the basis for all philosophical knowing. While agreeing with Ritschl's conclusion, Barth does not agree with the reasons he employs in its support. Ritschl held that cognition in theology and cognition in philosophy are of two fundamentally different kinds, namely, *Natur und Geist*. The way of knowing followed in religion and pertaining to morals is *sui generis*. The search for a shared foundation between natural and spiritual knowing cannot be conducted without obscuring their fundamental differentiation.<sup>53</sup> This move served to insulate theology from philosophy and *vice versa*. In a time when the scientific character and academic legitimacy of theology was often in question, this move to carve out an independent noetic position for theology was strategic. Reductionist tendencies in materialism and idealism that cast doubt on the object and foundation of theology as a science were avoided by Ritschl's firm epistemological dualism. On his view, philosophical reasoning cannot be used to undermine Christian truth claims. By the same token, attempts to establish theology with general metaphysical arguments, simply "fall short of their goal."<sup>54</sup>

Barth does agree with many of Ritschl's conclusions. Vis-à-vis the other sciences, dogmatics "does not have to justify itself before them, least of all by submitting to the demands of a concept of science which accidentally or not claims general validity."<sup>55</sup> He even agrees on a *sui generis* concept of knowledge for theology, which "cannot be definitively measured by the concept of the knowledge of other objects, by a general concept of knowledge."<sup>56</sup> For Barth, however, the uniqueness of the way of knowing in

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<sup>53</sup> "...any investigation of the common foundations of all being must set aside the particular characteristics by which one represents the difference between nature and spirit. . . . Such an analysis is inadequate for grasping the form and peculiarity of the spirit, and in that sense is without value" (Albrecht Ritschl, *Three Essays* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972], 154–155).

<sup>54</sup> He has in mind here particularly the traditional proofs for the existence of God (*Three Essays*, 154).

<sup>55</sup> CD I/1, 8 (KD I/1, 6, "Sie hat sich nicht vor ihnen zu rechtfertigen, vor allem nicht dadurch, daß sie sich den Anforderungen eines zufällig oder nicht zufällig allgemein gültigen Wissenschaftsbegriffs unterzieht").

<sup>56</sup> CD I/1, 190 (KD I/1, 198, ". . . der Begriff seiner Erkenntnis durchaus nicht ultimativ an dem Begriff der Erkenntnis anderer Gegenstände, an einem allgemeinen Erkenntnisbegriff gemessen werden darf. . .").

theology is entirely dependent on the uniqueness of its object and not a dualist epistemology<sup>57</sup> that merely nuances general knowing into two types, leaving them both anchored in general human noetic capacity. In Barth's view Ritschl did not prevail over the Enlightenment by overturning its false assumptions. Quite to the contrary, he saw Ritschl's thought as the 'quintessence'<sup>58</sup> and the 'fulfillment'<sup>59</sup> of the Enlightenment. Barth recognized in Ritschl little more than a return to the Kantian division between theoretical and practical reason.<sup>60</sup> It is not the freedom of God to determine for us the way to know God, rather it is a general principle of practical reason that provides and anchors theological knowing.

Another important difference with Ritschl is Barth's seeming nonchalance about the scientific character of theology, which was, for Ritschl, an essential demand. On Ritschl's scheme the rational credentials of theology depended on its scientific character flowing from the principles of *geistiges Leben*. Barth's concern was that no systematic constraints be put in place which would interfere with or limit the freedom of God in revelation, or presume a foregoing human access to God. He even allows that "it would make not the slightest difference to its real business if it had to rank as something other than science."<sup>61</sup>

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The English translation unnecessarily inserts an 'or' in this sentence which I have removed to more accurately render the original.

<sup>57</sup> Barth explicitly rejects the notion that human cognition in theological knowing is of a different kind from other instances of human cognition: "We are speaking of the human knowledge of God on the basis of this revelation and therefore of an event which formally and technically cannot be distinguished from what we call knowledge in other connexions, from human cognition" (*CD* II/1, 181; *KD* II/1, 203).

<sup>58</sup> "It was a tired age that thought it could see a gleam of hope in the theology of A. Ritschl, which in the event merely reached back over Idealism and Romanticism to the quintessence of the Enlightenment" (*CD* I/1, 276; *KD* I/1, 293).

<sup>59</sup> Regarding Ritschl, Barth writes "We can ask whether the entire theological movement of the century resulted not at all in an overcoming of the Enlightenment, of its decisive interest of man in himself, but in its fulfillment" (*Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 655–656).

<sup>60</sup> "... he [Ritschl] energetically seized upon the theoretical and practical philosophy of the Enlightenment in its perfected form. That is, he went back to Kant, but Kant quite definitely interpreted as an antimetaphysical moralist" (*Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 655).

<sup>61</sup> *CD* I/1, 8 (*KD* I/1, 6, "Es würde aber an dem, was sie zu tun hat, nicht das Geringste ändern, wenn sie als irgendetwas anderes denn gerade als 'Wissenschaft' zu gelten hätte").

For Barth, the way in which theology goes about its task can be considered 'scientific,'<sup>62</sup> but whether or not theology is viewed from the outside as a science according to criteria external to theology, is unimportant. Ritschl's concern to preserve theology as a science, in contrast, stemmed from his conviction that prevailing scientific standards really did have a proper claim on theology if theology was to be considered a rational enterprise. The distinction between Barth and Ritschl is crucial though somewhat counter-intuitive, and therefore often missed. Ritschl's division of knowledge is in fact positivistic<sup>63</sup> but derives from an underlying commitment to an Enlightenment movement of knowledge flowing from general and generally accessible principles of reason. Barth, on the other hand, often accused of positivism,<sup>64</sup> is actually much more concerned with the direction rather than the division of knowledge. He is not pitting revelation against reason, or 'giving up the integrity of reason,' as is often suspected.<sup>65</sup> He is merely rejecting the assumed priorities of an Enlightenment view of reason concerning what it means for theology to be reasonable or scientific. Unlike Ritschl, Barth is willing to grant that theology does not "know an object of enquiry necessarily concealed from other sciences." The distinction that Barth makes, once again, is that theology is not held to the same way of knowing that may govern contemporary science, because the way of the knowledge of God does not begin from below with a general theory of knowledge.

### *The Evidentialist Foundationalist Assumption*

This brings us to the *evidentialist foundationalist assumption*, the final of the three mentioned assumptions traditionally smuggled in with the question of the way of knowing in theology. The assumption here is that theological knowledge, like every other

<sup>62</sup> Barth gives practical reasons for considering theology a science, but never would he allow the direction of interpretation to begin from a general notion of science; on the contrary, simply by pursuing its task theology "shows what it means by true science" (*CD* I/1, 10–11; *KD* I/1, 9–10).

<sup>63</sup> "Positivism" is an elusive term, often casting more shadow than light. I am using the term in the sense defined by Paul Janz, "positivism in theology is any position that seeks to uphold the integrity of transcendence (or revelation) by giving up the integrity of reason or of natural enquiry" (*God, the Mind's Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 5).

<sup>64</sup> We have already considered this charge in Pannenberg. Perhaps Dietrich Bonhoeffer is the first to level the critique of positivism, though without much development in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged ed. (London: SCM Press, 1971), 280, 286, 328–339.

<sup>65</sup> Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, 5.

set of beliefs that aspires to the rank of knowledge, must spring from trustworthy grounds which are readily accessible to the theologian. This assumption is at the heart of the modernist commitment to foundationalism so roundly criticized in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>66</sup> It is important to note that there are two parts to this assumption, just as there are two aspects to the traditional foundationalist claim.<sup>67</sup> On the one hand there is a thesis about the structure of human knowing, on the other hand there is a requirement that the human knower have self-reflective 'access' to the basis of that structure. The first claim is that theological knowledge must spring from solid and dependable grounds. This means that there exist bedrock experiences or ideas that yield foundational beliefs that can be trusted to be true; and, that all knowledge must either be an instance of such a belief, or in a linear inferential relationship to it. The second claim is that these grounds are 'readily accessible.' This means that the human knower must be able to provide a reason for accepting a belief by demonstrating how that belief is inferentially connected to a foundational belief or itself could not fail to be true.<sup>68</sup> I'll refer to the first claim as the *foundation requirement* and the second claim as the *accessibility requirement*.<sup>69</sup> The distinction between these two claims will be crucial for a proper understanding of Barth and for the prospect of binging him with Plantinga into fruitful dialogue later. I will argue here that it is clear only that Barth rejects the second of the two claims. Once again

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<sup>66</sup> Bruce Marshall surmises that "Few theologians any longer will admit to being foundationalists" (*Trinity and Truth* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 80). A widely discussed critique of foundationalism from analytical philosophy is found in Laurence Bonjour, "Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1978).

<sup>67</sup> In the next chapter we will look at Plantinga's challenge to foundationalism, where he helpfully distinguishes various stripes of foundationalist doctrine. What we are here calling *evidentialist foundationalism* is what Plantinga distinguishes as *classical* or *strong foundationalism*.

<sup>68</sup> This is the accessibility requirement of epistemological "internalism," which Bonjour defines as follows: "a theory of justification is *internalist* if and only if it requires that all of the factors needed for a belief to be epistemically justified for a given person be *cognitively accessible* to that person, *internal* to his cognitive perspective" ("Externalism/Internalism," in *A Companion to Epistemology*, eds. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa [Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992], 132).

<sup>69</sup> Bruce Marshall divides foundationalism into three claims which map to our discussion as follows: his (F1) and (F2) taken together are the *accessibility requirement*, while his (F3) is the *foundational requirement* (*Trinity and Truth*, 54).

Barth's position can be clarified by distinguishing it from one of his theological predecessors—this time it is his most esteemed Marburg mentor, Wilhelm Herrmann.<sup>70</sup>

The most obvious attempts to meet the requirements of the *evidentialist foundationalist assumption* have been through philosophical proofs for the existence of God or truth of Christianity, beginning with Descartes *Meditations* and proceeding with more or less subtlety right up to the present day.<sup>71</sup> Herrmann thoroughly rejected the use of rational proofs in theology, whether as prolegomena or apologetics. Barth's summary of Herrmann's position is close to a stating of his own:<sup>72</sup> "The thought underlying such proofs—God is Lord of all—has validity only as an idea of religion itself; not as a road to religion."<sup>73</sup> On the freedom of God in revelation tied to the impossibility of a scientific demonstration, it appears Barth was a dutiful disciple of Herrmann: "The God of faith is neither 'demonstrable' reality nor is he merely a possibility. . . he is known only where he reveals his life; and where and to whom he will reveal it is his concern alone."<sup>74</sup> There is no hint in these quotations of an epistemological dualism (à la Ritschl) employed to secure theology's independence. It would seem that the independence of theology is itself

<sup>70</sup> Barth came to Marburg to study under Herrmann in 1908. "Finally in the summer of 1908, various circumstances brought it about that I was able to visit Marburg, which I had earnestly wanted to do because of Herrmann. I was now able to hear whom I wanted. . . . These three semesters in Marburg easily form my happiest memory as a student. I absorbed Herrmann through every pore" (*Karl Barth-Rudolf Bultmann Letters*, 153).

<sup>71</sup> See especially the Third Meditation in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham, rev. ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 24–36. At present, Richard Swinburne is probably best known for his pursuit of evidentialist arguments and natural theology. E.g., *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2003), 204–216. Approaches since the enlightenment are arguably different in character from medieval natural theology. For a defense of this point with respect to Aquinas' Five Ways, see Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 52–72.

<sup>72</sup> Barth, however, would never use the term 'religion' generically when referring to the revelation of God in Christ. Herrmann's "has validity only as an idea of religion itself" (*ist kraftvoll nur als Gedanke der Religion selbst*) could be understood here to be suggesting that the validity of the claim only holds within a particular sphere of human knowing (i.e. religion). Herrmann's point is rather about *from where* the validity is secured, not about the scope of that validity (*DHet*, 243; *DH*, 560).

<sup>73</sup> *DHet*, 243 (*DH*, 560, "Der jenen Beweisen zugrunde liegende Gedanke: Gott der Herr über allem! ist kraftvoll nur als Gedanke der Religion selbst, nicht als Weg zur Religion").

<sup>74</sup> *DHet*, 243 (*DH*, 560, "Sein Gott ist weder 'nachweisbar' Wirklichkeit noch auch nur Möglichkeit. . . . 'Er wird also nur erkannt, wo er sein Leben offenbart, und es ist seine Sache, wo und wem er es offenbaren will'").

secured by God's freedom in revelation and not the *sui generis* quality of a general ethical-religious knowing. Does this agreement between Herrmann and Barth, however, extend to the rejection of the *evidentialist foundationalist assumption*?

Barth acknowledges his indebtedness to Herrmann for imparting to him "one essential truth." He writes, "This truth, followed out to its consequences, later forced me to say almost everything else quite differently and finally led me even to an interpretation of the fundamental truth itself which was entirely different from his."<sup>75</sup> Barth is undoubtedly speaking here of what Herrmann sometimes referred to as the *autopistia* of Christian truth, "the conviction of Christian truth as based on itself."<sup>76</sup> This insight, however, did not receive the stress and clarity required in Barth's view.<sup>77</sup> It was shrouded instead by Herrmann's emphasis on the role of individual human experience in getting theology off the ground. Barth seizes on this statement of Herrmann to illustrate his point: "Knowledge of God is the expression of religious experience wholly without weapons."<sup>78</sup> Barth hails the "without weapons" precisely because of his rejection of the *accessibility requirement*, that requires the human knower to come armed with an argument to defend the knowledge claim. For Barth a human defense is not possible.<sup>79</sup> "He [God] Himself will uphold and defend it without human help or strength."<sup>80</sup> "Only the Logos of God Himself can provide the proof."<sup>81</sup> It is because of the principle of *autopistia* that such knowledge "has no basis or possibility outside itself."<sup>82</sup> This also explains why Barth cannot countenance Herrmann's double mindedness,<sup>83</sup> which while insisting that

<sup>75</sup> *DHet*, 239 (*DH*, 552, "Ich mir von Herrmann etwas Grundlegendes habe sagen lassen, das, in seine Konsequenzen verfolgt, mich nachher nötigte, so ziemlich alles Übrige ganz anders zu deuten als er").

<sup>76</sup> *DHet*, 258 (*DH*, 585, "das In-sich-selbst-Gegründetsein der christlichen Wahrheit").

<sup>77</sup> *DHet*, 268–270 (*DH*, 599–601).

<sup>78</sup> *DHet*, 248, 259 (*DH*, 568, 587, "Gotteserkenntnis ist der *wehrlose* Ausdruck des religiösen Erlebens").

<sup>79</sup> This impossibility of human demonstration leads William Abraham to conclude that Barth's "central epistemological claims about divine revelation have been a disaster, leaving its adherents stripped of help in confronting competing claims" (*Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006], 3).

<sup>80</sup> *CD* I/1, 31 (*KD* I/1, 30) quoting Luther ". . .also will ers auch selbs on menschen hülff und sterck handhaben und verteydigen. . ." (*Fastenpostille*, 1525, W.A., 17<sup>2</sup>, p. 108, 1. 26).

<sup>81</sup> *CD* I/1, 163 (*KD* I/1, 169, ". . .nur der Logos Gottes selbst den Beweis führen kann. . .").

<sup>82</sup> *CD* I/1, 120 (*KD* I/1, 123, ". . .keinen Grund und keine Möglichkeit außer seiner selbst hat. . .").

<sup>83</sup> Barth often anguishes over the tension in Herrmann between two contradicting points of view and the lamentable conclusion that the emphasis in Herrmann was on the wrong view. "If we ask first on which of the contradictory positions which he presented Herrmann himself, his heart, his professional character,

Christian truth is self-grounded, persistently undermines this claim with an appeal to the “inherent power of our (that is the believing Christian’s) experiencing intuition.”<sup>84</sup> Conscience (*Gewissen*) becomes the human point of contact with God.<sup>85</sup> It is important to see that the difference between Barth and Herrmann on this point is not a minor nuance or trivial detail; in Barth’s view, the separation is “only by a blade’s breadth and yet by a chasm’s depth.”<sup>86</sup> It finally makes the difference between an outright dismissal of the requirement for human access to the grounds of knowledge and merely a slight modification of that requirement which remains essentially unchanged. At this point Herrmann is more akin to Ritschl; the kind of human access granted to the basis of the religious knowledge claim does not take the form of syllogistic reasoning or scientific proof. Nevertheless, the basis remains accessible in the intuition of human experience,<sup>87</sup> what Herrmann often calls, “das innere Leben des Glaubens.”<sup>88</sup> One might argue that Herrmann does not claim that accessibility is required, only that it exists. But this is all we need to differentiate his position from Barth’s.

Distinguished from Herrmann, it should be clear that Barth makes a clean break with the *accessibility requirement* of the *evidentialist foundationalist assumption*. Theological knowing does not require human access or defense in order to be considered legitimate knowing primarily because it is self-grounded by its object—God. Barth not only denies cognitive accessibility to epistemic grounds as a requirement, he denies the very

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is to be sought, there can be no doubt of the answer” (*DHet*, 266–267; *DH*, 597). See also *CD* I/1, 86 (*KD* I/1, 88).

<sup>84</sup> *DHet*, 265 (*DH*, 597, “. . .die eigene Kraft unsrer, der gläubigen Christen erlebenden Intuition”).

<sup>85</sup> “Auf jedes noch einigermaßen rege Gewissen wirkt die Verbindung jener beiden Thatsachen in seiner Person als eine befreiende Offenbarung” (Wilhelm Herrmann, *Die Gewissheit des Glaubens und die Freiheit der Theologie* [Freiburg: Mohr, 1889], 30).

<sup>86</sup> *CD* I/1, 213 (*KD* I/1, 223, “. . .Messers Breite, aber abgrundtief. . .”).

<sup>87</sup> Religion is unlike “Wissenschaft und Kunst.” As Herrmann puts it, “Anders ist es in der Religion. . . wir werden doch immer nach seiner persönlichen Haltung beurtheilen, ob seine Gefühle echt find. . . Die wirkliche Herrschaft christlicher Frömmigkeit in einer Seele scheint uns ein inneres Leben zu begründen, dem wir gern vertrauen” (*Warum bedarf unser Glaube geschichtlicher Thatsachen?: Vortrag zur Feier des 22. März 1884 in Marburg gehalten*, Zweite Auflage [Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1891], 22).

<sup>88</sup> Alternatively, Herrmann employs the term, “persönliche Leben” (*Der Verkehr des Christen mit Gott: im Anschluss an Luther dargestellt*, Zweite gänzlich umgearbeitete Auflage [Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1892], 8–12, 75–101).

possibility that we could ourselves provide a complete and independent justification or demonstration of the basis of our theological knowing.

Having addressed the *accessibility requirement* we now turn to the *foundational requirement*. It is possible to be a foundationalist without accepting the *accessibility requirement*—without accepting the requirement to have an independent means of demonstrating the legitimacy of foundational beliefs.<sup>89</sup> Barth rejects the *accessibility requirement* because it violates the above-to-below way of theological knowing encountered in revelation. His is a theological epistemology that eschews all *human* foundations. We should resist, nevertheless, referring to Barth's position as 'non-foundational,' as if it lacked grounding altogether.<sup>90</sup> Barth is a foundationalist—not a classical foundationalist, but a theo-foundationalist.

In its most unassuming form, the *foundational requirement* stipulates that the structure of knowledge includes and is anchored in trustworthy foundational beliefs. In Barth's view our knowledge of God is anchored in a trustworthy foundation. Barth's theological epistemology, based on the reality of revelation breaking through from above to below, certainly rules out anti-foundationalism or pure coherentism.<sup>91</sup> What serves as the trustworthy foundation in Barth's theological epistemology is unambiguously God himself who is his speaking to us. The speech of God is his Word, Jesus Christ, self-revealed as we are brought into communion with God by the Spirit. This being-revealed-to is the trustworthy foundation and well-spring of all human knowing of God. Is there such a thing then as a foundational *belief*? The answer to this question, and therefore the answer to the question about Barth's attitude toward the *foundational requirement*, turns on what counts as a foundational *belief*. It is clear that human knowledge of God for Barth involves *believing*. Knowing God is the gift of faith where knowing, believing and

<sup>89</sup> It is possible to be a foundationalist without being an *evidentialist* foundationalist.

<sup>90</sup> Nowhere does Barth commend an insulated coherentism. Barth would have warmed to aspects of Ronald Thiemann's *nonfoundational* theology, while firmly repudiating the suggestion that "theology seeks its criteria of judgment within the first-order language of church practice" (*Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985], 75). Although Thiemann, like Barth, emphasizes God's prevenience, the criterion for Barth is God in his revelation—the act of divine self-disclosure. The criterion is not something handed over to the church by means of this revelation (e.g., the 'narrated promise').

<sup>91</sup> On a coherentist model the mutual support of beliefs is an intuition that characterizes the entire structure of knowledge. Coherentism, in its purest form, considers coherence with the belief structure to be the only criteria for belief justification. See *WCB*, 78–80.



obeying the Truth are inseparable. We are given the gift of trustworthy foundational *believing*, but we are not given the gift of the knowledge of God packaged in individual foundational truth-statements.<sup>92</sup> As discussed earlier, individual propositional expressions in human language do not have the power to contain the Truth.<sup>93</sup> That is not to say that there are not objectively better and worse ways of striving to express in human terms the trustworthy human knowledge of God. But these expressions are always second order reflections, derivative and dependent on the actual knowing relation.

What we have then is an affirmation of the absolute certainty of the foundation but a rejection of any confidence in human attempts to build either to it or upon it. We should acknowledge that this is to undo completely what the *foundational requirement* was intended to do. The *foundational requirement* assumes that truth can be adequately conveyed in belief-statements, and furthermore that truth value can be transferred to belief-statements in a direct inferential relationship to previously established belief-statements. At one level, we should recognize that this is indeed rightly how we strive to build our knowledge. It is an implicit assumption in all human reasoning.<sup>94</sup> For Barth, however, this striving which is indeed part of the task of theology, is ever only a striving after the given foundation in an inevitably imperfect effort to aim at the truth of revelation, in which we only succeed by the grace of the Holy Spirit.<sup>95</sup> This means that

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<sup>92</sup> “The concept of truths of revelation (*Offenbarungswahrheiten*) in the sense of Latin propositions (*lateinischen Sätzen*) given and sealed once for all with divine authority in both wording and meaning is theologically impossible . . . The freely acting God Himself and alone is the truth of revelation (*Offenbarungswahrheit*)” (*CD* I/1, 15; *KD* I/1, 14–15).

<sup>93</sup> See again *CD* I/1, 165 (*KD* I/1, 171). The distinctions between true propositions about God, their expression in human words, and grasp in human conception are taken up in greater detail in chapter 6.

<sup>94</sup> F. LeRon Shults correctly observes that “inferential patterns in thinking” and the “intuition that being rational includes having good reasons as a basis for our beliefs” are even for nonfoundationalists “evident in their argumentative performance” (*The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 30).

<sup>95</sup> Barth states that the real task of dogmatics is to question the Church’s talk about God in light of God’s self-revelation. He distinguishes dogma from dogmas and dogmatic propositions. The formulation of dogmas and dogmatic propositions is always only a striving to aim at the truth of revelation without any possibility of succeeding outside of the grace of God. The truth of revelation cannot be isolated and contained in a mere human proposition, “in abstraction from the person of Him who reveals it and from the revelatory act of this person in which it is given to other persons to perceive” (*CD* I/1, 267–270; *KD* I/1, 283–285).

the foundation of our theological knowing is also its apex.<sup>96</sup> We cannot independently build on this knowledge but only revel in, reflect on and point to it, again and again subjecting our speech to the criterion of Christ the one and only True Revelation of God.<sup>97</sup> Truth is not transferred to our belief-statements but rather sits in judgment over them. Another way to put this is that Barth is not first an epistemological foundationalist but first an ontological foundationalist.<sup>98</sup> The ontological foundation of theological knowing is its epistemological foundation and basis for judging all theological reflection.

This brings us to the close of our brief excursus on Barth's rejection of the epistemological assumptions of the Enlightenment. I have argued that it is on the basis of the way of knowing established by the ontological priority of God's self-revelation that Barth refuses to accept these assumptions, with their attending contrary ontological presuppositions. On the basis of this discussion we can conclude that, for Barth, theology is not required to accept the obligations, direction or rules of any philosophy which would impinge upon its way of knowing. In short, Barth's theo-foundationalism shares the conviction that knowledge has a ground, while granting nothing to Enlightenment foundationalist assumptions about the nature of that ground.

## ***The Boundary of Philosophy***

We have discussed Barth's recognition that engagement with the realm of philosophy is inevitable for theology<sup>99</sup> and that "familiarity with the thinking of the philosopher"<sup>100</sup> is

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<sup>96</sup> It is worth noting that there is an ambiguity in our use of the term *foundation*. With respect to foundationalism, *foundation* refers to that set of our beliefs which is accepted without an inferential ground in other beliefs. The way I am using the term here, however, is in the sense of the foundation undergirding our foundational beliefs, which is for Barth an undemonstrable free act of God. Theo-foundationalism, therefore, calls into question the stability of foundational belief by highlighting our epistemic dependence on a foundation for our *believing*.

<sup>97</sup> "The criterion of past, future and therefore present Christian utterance is thus the being of the Church, namely, Jesus Christ, God in His gracious revealing and reconciling address to man" (*CD* I/1, 4; *KD* I/1, 2–3).

<sup>98</sup> Regarding the Bible and church proclamation, "both renounce any foundation apart from that which God has given once and for all by speaking" (*CD* I/1, 120; *KD* I/1, 123).

<sup>99</sup> "[Theology] involves a fundamental reflection upon reality by means of that very same thought which is also the tool of the philosophers" (*SITet*, 32; *SIT*, 61).

<sup>100</sup> *CD* I/1, 283 (*KD* I/1, 300, "Vertrautheit mit dem Denken des Philosophen").

a requirement for the theologian. We have also seen that Barth's theology of revelation dethrones philosophy as the founder and judge of theological knowledge. From these two assertions, one affirming the other cautioning, we can conclude that in Barth's view there is a proper though constrained role for philosophy in theology. The boundaries of philosophy are established by revelation in its movement from above to below. The implications of these boundaries for Barth were evident in our discussion of his rejection of Enlightenment foundationalism. But what is to guide the theologian in the proper use of philosophy?

An excellent source for locating Barth's material concerns for the interaction with philosophy is in his 1929 essay "Schicksal und Idee in Der Theologie." Here he highlights the benefits and dangers for theology of realism and idealism, which he sees as opposite poles in philosophy. Barth begins with realism because he finds a measure of realism to be an unavoidable (we might even say incorrigible) starting point. "If we are going to talk about God as the object of theology, then we will already be advancing a typically realist proposition."<sup>101</sup> God is objectively real; and, by claiming that God is real we include God in the reality in which we experience ourselves and the world.<sup>102</sup> But philosophical realism must be kept in check. The danger, if taken uncritically, is that the realist will suppose that knowledge of God can be read directly from the data of given experience, whether subjectively or empirically. But the confidence with which the theologian knows God is a "confidence in God's self-giving" which is "rather different from realism's confidence in God's givenness."<sup>103</sup> A confidence in God's givenness entails an unwarranted anthropological assumption that we have a properly functioning human capacity to know God by means of the use of our own endowments applied to the data of given experience. This assumption is not entailed in the presupposition of revelation; in fact, the order of knowing in revelation and the powerlessness of the creaturely form independently to deliver the knowledge of God suggests quite the opposite. The knowledge of God requires the accompanying action of God breaking

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<sup>101</sup> *SITet*, 35 (*SIT*, 64–65, "Wenn wir Gott als den *Gegenstand* der Theologie bezeichnen, so ist das bereits ein typisch realistischer Satz").

<sup>102</sup> *SITet*, 36 (*SIT*, 65–66).

<sup>103</sup> *SITet*, 40 (*SIT*, 70, ". . . die Zuversicht auf sein Gegebenheit, die etwas Anderes wäre als die Zuversicht auf sein Sichselbergeben. . .").

through to us in revelation, in which he himself is the very content.<sup>104</sup> God lifts our reason to give us a knowledge of himself through the medium of creaturely experience. "Reason's normal activity is not interrupted; but it is directed, guided and ordered by something superior to itself, something that has no part in its antithesis."<sup>105</sup> While encountering us through the data of given experience, however, the knowledge of God can never be reduced to that experience or derived from it independently from the determining act of God.<sup>106</sup> This is where the chastening of idealism is helpful.

In its pursuit of truth, idealism is critically reflective about the limits of human knowing.<sup>107</sup> Idealism recognizes the problem of our inability to secure a neutral ground of knowing outside of ourselves, a "view from nowhere." We have no unobscured access to the knowledge of God through the data of experience. If we are to know God, God must make himself known to us. "If theology is to remain grounded in God's revelation, then the idealist is going to have to dampen his ardor for a generally accessible truth, and to join forces with the realist."<sup>108</sup> But the chastening of a critical idealism should never be seen to repudiate what Barth has affirmed in a proper critical realism—namely, that God really reveals himself to us in otherwise inadequate creaturely thoughts, experience and words, without becoming identical to them.<sup>109</sup> The fact that knowing God is, *from below*,

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<sup>104</sup>... "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"—what does that mean if not that the Word, and hence the God with whom we have to do, entered into our own particular mode of being, that of nature and history? Jesus Christ as the Word of God to us and therefore himself as God is the content of revelation. And also the Holy Spirit, who illumines the Word for us and us for the Word, is himself God, is the content of revelation" (*SITet*, 35; *SIT*, 65).

<sup>105</sup> *SITet*, 50 (*SIT*, 81, ". . . daß die durchaus nicht zu unterbrechende Vernunfttätigkeit Weisung, Leitung, Ordnung bekommt aus einem Oberhalb ihrer selbst, das an ihrer Antithetik keinen Anteil hat").

<sup>106</sup> *SITet*, 49 (*SIT*, 80).

<sup>107</sup> *SITet*, 42–43 (*SIT*, 72–73).

<sup>108</sup> *SITet*, 47 (*SIT*, 78, "Er müßte sich gegenüber allem undisziplinierten Hunger nach allgemein zugänglicher Wahrheit darin schon mit dem Realisten zusammenfinden. . . wenn wir die Begründung der Theologie in Gottes Offenbarung nicht verleugnen wollen").

<sup>109</sup> Those who would claim Barth for postmodernism are in danger of hearing the second word of chastening idealism as a repudiation of the first word of critical realism, which stakes its confidence in the Word that became flesh. See especially Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27–33. Ward suggests that Barth presents two antithetical views without providing a way to move between them. He presents these as two competing models of language which reflect respectively a naïve realism and a strong idealism. "Barth needs to provide a . . . coherent account of the interplay between two antithetical models for the nature of language.

a human impossibility does not change the fact that God, *from above*, has made it possible for humans to know him. While much is made of the influence of Kantianism or neo-Kantianism on Barth<sup>110</sup> it is clear that in Barth's view Kantian idealism could not get passed its antithesis with realism,<sup>111</sup> and theology admits no more of a proof from practical reason than it did from pure reason.<sup>112</sup> Kantianism may be helpful in its critique of realism, but it has no privileged philosophical status with Barth.<sup>113</sup>

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One offers a direct correspondence between signifier and signified, word and Word, but constitutes a natural theology and dissolves the distinction between the creaturely and the divine, the human and God as Wholly Other. The other denies the possibility of moving beyond mediation and, therefore, the possibility of any true knowledge of God as Wholly Other." Word become flesh is not enough for Ward. See critical reviews in Bruce L. McCormack, "Graham Ward's Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49, no. 1 (1996), and David Guretzki, "Barth, Derrida and *Différance*: Is There a Difference?," *Didaskalia* 13, no. 2 (2002).

<sup>110</sup> There is, of course, Bonhoeffer's famous praise of Barth's second Romans edition, "in spite of all the neo-Kantian egg-shells," Bonhoeffer, 328. Simon Fisher stresses the early influence of neo-Kantianism on Barth but rightly points to Bonhoeffer's caution that Barth merely "makes use of the philosophical language of neo-Kantianism" and that it would be "rash to call him a neo-Kantian" (quoted in *Revelatory Positivism?*, 185). In the same way, Bruce McCormack stresses that while Marburg neo-Kantianism was an important influence on Barth, even in his early theology Barth made use of it only "where to do so strengthened the case he wanted to make theologically—or at least, did not infringe upon that theology" (*Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 42).

<sup>111</sup> "Kant still moves within this antithesis of the singular and the general, the empirical and the rational" (*CD* I/1, 146; *KD* I/1, 151). Barth saw evidence of this in Kant's rejection of the incarnation: "if, according to Kant, something corresponding to what is called the 'Word' in the prologue to St John's Gospel exists, there is certainly, according to him, no suggestion that this Word might by any chance have become flesh" (*Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 288).

<sup>112</sup> Neil MacDonald is right to protest that "Barth's theology itself, is not dependent on Kant's anthropocentric turn implicit in his critique of the bounds of reason" (Neil B. Macdonald, *Karl Barth and the Strange New World within the Bible: Barth, Wittgenstein, and the Metadilemmas of the Enlightenment* [Carlisle, England: Waynesboro Paternoster Press, 2000], 11).

<sup>113</sup> It has recently been suggested in John Hart's very useful translation and commentary on the Barth-Brunner correspondence that Barth proclaims Kantianism to be "the most desirable and helpful position" ("The Barth-Brunner Correspondence," in *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 29). Daniel Migliore picks up on this supposed concession as an example of Barth's position not being isolationist with respect to other faiths ("Response to the Barth-Brunner Correspondence," in *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 50). The translation, however, is flawed. "Was ich höchstens als wünschenswert und hilfreich bezeichnen

What we can see from this example of Barth's interaction with philosophy is that the guiding principle he employs for determining the boundaries of philosophy is the very same criterion that guided his rejection of Enlightenment foundationalism. Philosophy is of use to theology so long as it allows theology to remain grounded in God's self-revelation. Revelation breaks through to us in a creaturely form bringing us face to face with the very Word of God in that creaturely form. Philosophy may not trespass the dynamics of revelation by separating or collapsing the form and content—by equating the creaturely form with the divine or by suggesting that we can have direct access to the divine content without the creaturely form. “The one would be realistic theology, the other idealistic theology, and both bad theology.”<sup>114</sup> The criterion regulating the use of philosophy is therefore the same criterion that regulates theology itself, Jesus Christ the Word of God, the Revelation of God, self-revealed to human beings in a creaturely form.

## Conclusion

Barth saw Feuerbach's critique of religion as a clarion call to Christian theology. Feuerbach exposed the fact that Christian theology, when justifying itself by an analogy from the human being to the divine being, grounded God in man. This is precisely why there can be no philosophical compromise on the priority of the particularity of God's self-revelation in theological knowing. Barth's “No” to philosophy is aimed at precluding the possibility that the object of theology might become a human invention. Our objective in this chapter has been to understand better Barth's restrictions on philosophy for theological knowing. We began with what Barth believes to be the only basis for the knowledge of God, God himself in his self-revelation. Barth's theology of revelation, which is itself intended to be a thinking after revelation, motivates Barth's theological epistemology. The way of knowing in theology is initiated by and in God from above to below. Human knowers are given clear and unambiguous knowledge of God when they are brought by the power of the Spirit into communion with Christ and given a sharing in his knowledge. This knowing is transformative and personal but also cognitive. God comes to us in a verbal creaturely form, and, without giving himself over as the form, is

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könnte,” should be translated, “what I could *at most* denote as desirable and helpful.” This is far from an emphatic endorsement of the superiority of Kant.

<sup>114</sup> CD I/1, 175 (KD I/1, 182, “Das eine wäre realistische, das andere wäre idealistische und beides wäre falsche Theologie”).

really given to the knower *in* the form by the miracle and mystery of grace. Revelation is not itself propositional statements, but it may be delivered by means of them. It is this theological epistemology derived in reflection on from-above revelation that is driving all of Barth's pronouncements against philosophy.<sup>115</sup>

I have endeavored to show that these pronouncements are not directed at the language, questions and tools of the realm of philosophy—all of which are available to theology and with which theologians must work. On the contrary, Barth's denunciation is leveled against philosophy's presumed competency, based on an ungrounded ontological assumption,<sup>116</sup> to regulate and establish *from below* truth about God independent of revelation. It was this presumed competency that inveigled the theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century to accept the demands of Enlightenment foundationalism without notice of the cost. And yet, Barth still holds out the possibility for a Christian philosophy or philosopher who also works in the light of and strives for obedience to the revelation of God. Philosophy can and must be employed in a way that observes the dependence of human theological knowing on the grace of the miracle and mystery of God's self-revelation.

With a clarified understanding of Barth's theological epistemology and its implications for the role of philosophy, we will now turn to the Christian philosophy of Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga endeavors to challenge philosophical arguments against Christian belief on philosophy's own terms. The question that will guide our investigation is whether Plantinga's approach is amenable to Barth's guidance.

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<sup>115</sup> As T. F. Torrance maintains, Barth does not endorse "the rejection of philosophical thinking," but offers instead "the development of a rigorous rational epistemology governed by the nature of the object, namely, God in his self-communication to us within the structures of our human and worldly existence" (*Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990], 122).

<sup>116</sup> The ontological assumption that Barth opposes is "that the Word of God is one of the realities that are universally present and ascertainable and therefore created" (*CD* I/1, 159; *KD* I/1, 164).

# PART II:

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF ALVIN  
PLANTINGA IN DIALOGUE WITH  
KARL BARTH



## 3

**PLANTINGA'S CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHIZING  
AND WARRANT**

Nearly twenty-five years since James Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen declared that Alvin Plantinga “is widely recognized as the most important philosopher of religion now writing,”<sup>1</sup> it may still be true. In the analytic tradition his rival is not to be found. Plantinga’s contributions include penetrating treatments of questions in modal logic, modal metaphysics, agency and causation, philosophy of mind, possible worlds theory, and more. What we are most concerned with presently are his celebrated studies in epistemology<sup>2</sup> and the theological epistemology defended in them.<sup>3</sup> The intent of the next two chapters is to excogitate Plantinga’s theological epistemology as we have Karl Barth’s, looking closely at any positive theological construction alongside his assumptions about the right range and role of philosophy in responding to questions of theological knowing. We will then be positioned to address the main question of this work regarding the compatibility of their thought by considering where Plantinga may

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<sup>1</sup> *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1985), ix.

<sup>2</sup> What has come to be known as *reformed epistemology*, though Plantinga himself at one time referred to it as ‘Calvinist Epistemology’ (“Self-Profile,” in *Alvin Plantinga*, 55). Particular attention will be given to *Warranted Christian Belief*, the culmination of Plantinga’s Warrant trilogy.

<sup>3</sup> We will continue to use the term ‘theological epistemology’ to designate views about the way and nature of human knowledge of God.

have exceeded Barth's boundaries for philosophy and where tensions may exist between the theological epistemology Barth is advancing and the one that Plantinga is defending. Plantinga and Barth differ greatly in their goals and methods. They are approaching a common subject—the knowledge of God—from two different angles of inquiry. We are therefore guaranteed a certain degree of descriptive parallax which might be mistaken for real variance. What we are most interested in determining is to what degree their thought is centrolineal—moving along separate lines from and towards a common midpoint. What core assumptions are held in common, and are these shared assumptions enough to keep their projects from colliding so that the combined light cast on the center is mutually illuminating?

In this chapter we will focus on Plantinga's understanding of Christian scholarship and the role of Christian philosophy in relation to theology. I will argue that the fundamental lineaments of Plantinga's conceptions of truth and knowledge are clear and broadly compatible with Barth's critique of the philosophical approach to theological knowing, while also flagging for later exploration the tensions over natural theology and apologetics. In the next chapter we will take up Plantinga's epistemology of Christian belief, tracing first his positive, conditional model for how Christian belief might have warrant, and then diving into his defense of Christian belief against overreaching atheological arguments. I will argue that Plantinga's project shares the heart of Barth's concern: that we recognize that the knowledge of God is only secured by God's self-revelation—that it “derives and is to be considered only from outside all human possibilities, i.e., from the acting of God Himself.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***The Concern of the Christian Philosopher***

Plantinga concludes his extraordinarily influential *Advice to Christian Philosophers* with the following charge: “We who are Christians and propose to be philosophers must not rest content with being philosophers who happen, incidentally, to be Christians; we must strive to be Christian philosophers.”<sup>5</sup> Taking a look at Plantinga's notion of what it

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<sup>4</sup> CD I/1, 38 (KD I/1, 38, “nur von einem Außerhalb aller menschlichen Möglichkeiten, nämlich von dem handelnden Gott her ist und einzusehen ist”).

<sup>5</sup> “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1984): 271. Writing his “self-profile” in 1983, right before his move to Notre Dame, Plantinga details his goals for the future and makes the following comment: “Finally I hope to continue to think about the question of how Christianity bears on

means to be a Christian philosopher is a helpful entry point into his more fundamental epistemological convictions. These convictions shape not only his ideas about Christian philosophy, but all of Christian scholarship.

### *On Christian Scholarship*

Arguably Plantinga's greatest contribution to the Christian academic community has been his defense and championing of the right and responsibility of every Christian scholar to approach unapologetically his or her discipline from a Christian perspective. We might label this Plantinga's call for *constructive Christian scholarship*.

Take a given area of scholarship: philosophy, let's say, or history, or psychology, or anthropology, or economics, or sociology; in working at these areas, shouldn't we take for granted the Christian answer to the large questions about God and creation, and then go on from that perspective to address the narrower questions of that discipline? Or is that somehow illicit or ill-advised?<sup>6</sup>

For Plantinga, the reasoning is clear: when seeking the right answer to any problem it is best to avail oneself of all potentially relevant information.<sup>7</sup> Being a Christian involves

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philosophy. Although I have devoted considerable thought to these issues, I have much less to show for it than I'd like. What difference does being a Christian make to being a philosopher?" ("Self-Profile," 94). He fulfills this objective on November 4 of the same year in his inaugural address as John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, "Advice to Christian Philosophers." The position he adopts here he maintains consistently and further elaborates in the following: "On Christian Scholarship," in *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, ed. Theodore Hesburgh (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); "The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship: 1989 Stob Lectures," in *Seeking Understanding: The Stob Lectures, 1986–1998* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," *The Monist* 75, no. 3 (July 1992); and, "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," in *Christian Philosophy at the Close of the Twentieth Century: Assessment and Perspective*, eds. Sander Griffioen and Bert M. Balk (Kampen, Netherlands: Uitgeverij Kok, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> "On Christian Scholarship," 290.

<sup>7</sup> "What we need here is scholarship that takes account of all that we know, and thus takes account of what we know as Christians" ("On Christian Scholarship," 291). "The best way to do these sciences, says the Augustinian, is to use all that we know, including what we know by faith or revelation" ("The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship: 1989 Stob Lectures," 159).

assent to some theological presuppositions that, if true, bear significantly on the questions scholars wrestle with. Repressing important information leaves unexplored avenues to greater clarity, synthesis and depth. This is particularly the case for the sciences and humanities when the data in question has broad implications for a general understanding of the world and human beings. On Plantinga's view, Christian belief includes a legitimate claim to knowledge which has these broad implications. Christian scholarship will therefore not ignore, but begin with those pivotal Christian truth claims.<sup>8</sup> In order for Christian scholars to forge ahead without abandoning their Christian assumptions, however, requires that they allow themselves greater independence from the arbitrary prohibitions of the academic establishment against what is permitted to serve as grounds for scholarly judgments.<sup>9</sup> The greatest threat to *constructive Christian scholarship* is an acceptance of dominant cultural assumptions that are fundamentally at odds with Christian belief. For this reason, in addition to the constructive task there is an important critical work to be done; this we could call *critical Christian scholarship*.<sup>10</sup> If the focus of the constructive task is to clarify, deepen and systematize Christian thought, the aim of the critical task is to analyze and engage with alternative projects "so that their relationship to Christian ways of thought is made evident."<sup>11</sup> The constructive task seeks to build inwardly, while the critical focus is to engage externally. Plantinga encourages Christian scholars to see that the dominant cultural perspectives are not neutral alternatives to the Christian position but actively opposed to Christian belief. He identifies *perennial naturalism* and *creative anti-realism* as two currently dominant strands of thought antithetic to Christian belief and demanding critical attention.<sup>12</sup> So,

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<sup>8</sup> "The Christian philosopher has a perfect right to the point of view and prephilosophical assumptions he brings to philosophic work; the fact that these are not widely shared outside the Christian or theistic community is interesting but fundamentally irrelevant" ("Advice to Christian Philosophers," 258).

<sup>9</sup> Addressing Christian philosophy in particular, Plantinga writes, "my plea is for the Christian philosopher, the Christian philosophical community, to display, first, more independence and autonomy: we needn't take as our research projects just those projects that currently enjoy widespread popularity; we have our own questions to think about" ("Advice to Christian Philosophers," 269).

<sup>10</sup> Plantinga refers to the constructive task as "positive Christian science" or simply "Christian scholarship," while calling the critical task "Christian cultural criticism." See "On Christian Scholarship," 291; and, "The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship: 1989 Stob Lectures," 160.

<sup>11</sup> "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," 45.

<sup>12</sup> Plantinga consistently identifies naturalism and creative anti-realism as the primary contemporary rivals to Christian thought, though sometimes giving more emphasis to the offspring of creative anti-realism:

Christian scholarship of every type ought to attend to both its constructive and critical tasks; in this regard Christian philosophy is not different from other disciplines.

### *Theology and Christian Scholarship*

It is worth asking whether Plantinga considers Christian theology itself to be a scholarly discipline with this same two-fold task. Barth, it would appear, is loath to accept a definition of theology's task as a particular instantiation of a more general academic principle. But there is little reason to doubt that both Barth and Plantinga would regard theology, along with the rest of Christian scholarship, as having both constructive and critical responsibilities. Barth frames the very definition of Christian theology in terms of its critical dogmatic task—that of the church criticizing its own talk about God.<sup>13</sup> And as for the unique constructive task of Christian theology, Barth affirms Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum*.<sup>14</sup> Theology's positive scientific work is one of reflecting on God's address to us in faith. The crucial point for Barth is that theology remain autonomously theo-foundational. This means that theology is done in obedience to the object of theology—God made known by God's own self-revelation. The starting point does not require the impossibility of an external prolegomenous validation. The concern for autonomy and the defense of the presumption of Christian faith are shared by Plantinga.

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"relativism and anti-commitment" ("On Christian Scholarship," 291). In his charge to Calvin College graduates he simply mentions naturalism and relativism. "There are at present three main spiritual responses to the world, three main pictures of the world or perspectives on it, three main ways of thinking about the world and what the world is really like and what we ourselves are really like, and what we must do to live the good life. One of these, of course, is Christianity, and I needn't say much about that to this audience. In addition to the Christian perspective, however, there are fundamentally two others. The first is what I'll call naturalism. . . . There is another rival to Christian ways of thinking, another perspective, and I'll call it relativism" ("Our Vision": Calvin College Commencement Address, May 20, 2000 [Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 2000], DVD Video).

<sup>13</sup> "Theology as a science, in distinction from the 'theology' of the simple testimony of faith and life and the 'theology' of the service of God, is a measure taken by the Church in relation to the vulnerability and responsibility of its utterance" (*CD* I/1, 4; *KD* I/1, 2).

<sup>14</sup> *Anselm, Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 16-18 (*Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselms Beweis der Existenz Gottes im Zusammenhang Seines Theologischen Programms*, *Forschungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus*, Reihe 4, Bd. 3 [München: C. Kaiser, 1931], 6-8).

The rightful autonomy, not just of theology, but of all Christian scholarship is a main plank of Plantinga's platform.

It should be clear, therefore, that Barth and Plantinga agree that theology and all of Christian scholarship are free to start, and must start, with a given. A crucial question, however, remains: Do Barth and Plantinga agree about just what this *given* is, and whether it is the same for theology and the rest of Christian scholarship? This is a question about epistemological foundations, however, and must therefore be deferred until we have taken a closer look at Plantinga's epistemology of Christian belief. For now, a few provisional comments on Plantinga's understanding of the relationship between faith and reason will help to sharpen the question.

For Plantinga, Christian scholarship is done by appeal both to the deliverances of faith and to the deliverances of reason. The deliverances of reason are employed in the service of "explicating the bearing of the faith on some part of the discipline in question."<sup>15</sup> The *given* for Christian scholarship appears therefore to be the *content* of the deliverances of faith. What then is delivered by the deliverances of faith? One suggestion is that the deliverances of faith deliver particular expressed propositions that are fundamental to Christian belief. "It is crucial to Christian belief to suppose that such propositions as *God created the world* and *Christ's suffering and death are an atonement for human sin* are true."<sup>16</sup> But this view comes dangerously close to the conclusion that the gift of faith involves the clean transfer of truth about God into propositional statements in human language, an idea that Barth, as we have seen, strongly rejects. Plantinga and Barth agree that the gift of faith is a gift of knowledge. Barth however is very clear that this knowledge is the self-revelation of the person of God in Christ by the Spirit, and not a collection of stand-alone propositions. Revelation is cognitive and verbal, but the form of human language is never adequate to the content of the knowledge of God outside of the gracious work of the Spirit who gives us a participation in Christ's knowing of the Father. Plantinga moves much more quickly to propositions. He appeals to Calvin's definition of faith, which "involves an explicitly cognitive element; it is, says Calvin, knowledge—knowledge of the availability of redemption and salvation through the person and work of Jesus Christ—and it is revealed to our minds."<sup>17</sup> There certainly seems to be a tension

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<sup>15</sup> "The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship: 1989 Stob Lectures," 159.

<sup>16</sup> *WCB*, 425.

<sup>17</sup> *WCB*, 244.

here between Barth and Plantinga at a foundational level regarding the nature of the knowledge of God, with Barth emphasizing the personal, and Plantinga the propositional. There are good reasons to suspect that the tension is not as severe as it may seem; however, due to the importance and complexity of the issue, we will leave off here and return to it again in greater detail in chapter 6. Before leaving it altogether, however, let us make one observation that moves in the direction of concord.

We mentioned above that while Barth might agree with Plantinga that theology, like the rest of Christian scholarship, has a critical and constructive task, the particularities of that task for theology are quite unique. That task has to do with measuring the church's talk about God by the church's very being, Jesus Christ, the personal revelation of God. The pronouncements of theology are therefore second order reflections, faith seeking understanding, derivative and dependent on the actual knowing relation.<sup>18</sup> Plantinga concurs with Barth in two important ways. First, for Plantinga, theology has a role unique from and pivotal to the rest of Christian scholarship (including Christian philosophy). Theology tells us what we know by faith. It tells us just what are the deliverances of faith. The rest of Christian scholarship works from this theological foundation, employing reason to determine the implications of this theological foundation for each discipline. Plantinga, like Barth, reserves a special and primary place for the theological task;<sup>19</sup> moreover, he seems to affirm theology as a second-order reflection on faith.<sup>20</sup> If the knowledge of faith comes pre-packaged in propositional statements such that the deliverances of faith are self-evident to all Christian scholars, then the theological task would involve no interpretive reflection, only a reiterating of these statements and an unpacking of their logical entailments. In an illuminating comment, however, Plantinga affirms that "theology is both important and necessary" because we need "to know what we know by faith."<sup>21</sup> If there is work to be done in order to know what we know by faith, then there must be a distinction between first order knowing of faith itself and the second

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<sup>18</sup> Barth affirms what he takes to be Anselm's view that, for theology, *intellectus* is always *intellectus fidei*, "das im *Credo* vorgesezte nachdenken" (*Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, 37).

<sup>19</sup> For Barth, it is not necessary that the theological task be performed as an independent discipline, but that detracts in no way from the uniqueness and importance of the theological task (*CD* I/1, 5; *KD* I/1, 3).

<sup>20</sup> Paul Helm includes Plantinga's project in his treatment of the *faith seeking understanding* tradition (Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding*, Reason and Religion [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997], 182–203).

<sup>21</sup> "The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship: 1989 Stob Lectures," 157.

order reflection of theology. It is safe to say that there is more going on than a simplified, direct, propositional transfer of knowledge in Plantinga's view of faith and revelation. But this still leaves a number of pressing questions that will be given greater consideration in chapter 6.

### *Christian Philosophy*

We have outlined Plantinga's views on the constructive and critical task of all Christian scholarship; a task which begins unapologetically with central theological convictions, seeking the implications of those convictions for each discipline, by the light of reason. Now it is time to return to the main question of this section: what is the task of the Christian philosopher? For our purposes we also want to pay particular attention to how Plantinga conceives of the difference between philosophy and theology.

To begin with, we have already established that Christian philosophy shares with other disciplines in the two-fold task of Christian scholarship. We have also touched on Plantinga's distinction between theology and all the other disciplines, including philosophy. What then is Christian philosophy's special function? Plantinga's main answer to this question is simply that Christian philosophy is to address itself to the particular questions of its discipline from a Christian perspective. His *Advice to Christian Philosophers* is devoted to challenging Christian philosophers to have the courage, independence and integrity to allow Christian theological convictions to set the agenda for their work.<sup>22</sup> This has direct implications for the relationship between philosophy and theology. Philosophy is not the beginning of the road—faith is. “The Christian philosophical community, quite properly starts, in philosophy, from what it believes.”<sup>23</sup> Plantinga is in complete agreement with Barth that theological knowledge does not require the grounding of a philosophical argument. This does not mean, however, that there is no role in Plantinga's thought for philosophy marshaled in the defense and clarification of Christian belief. In fact, much of what Plantinga does as a Christian philosopher is to employ philosophical reasoning to just these ends. Consistent with this, Plantinga highlights two roles for philosophy, which are in addition to its two-fold task;

<sup>22</sup> “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” 269.

<sup>23</sup> “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” 269.



these are the important functions of apologetics and philosophical theology.<sup>24</sup> Here we face another potential contrast with Karl Barth.

Barth maintains that if Christian theological convictions are really properly held independent of philosophical grounding, there is no need for a philosophical defense of them (i.e., apologetics). For Barth, we need not even enter into debate about the basis of our theological knowing or questions about God's existence.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, "all planned apologetics and polemics have obviously been irresponsible, irrelevant and therefore ineffective."<sup>26</sup> It is difficult indeed to reconcile Barth's views here with Plantinga's. Despite the fact that Plantinga has been charged with dismissing Christian apologetics altogether, he clearly maintains that apologetics, both in its negative and positive forms, is a notably valuable and important endeavor.<sup>27</sup> Even though philosophical arguments do not provide justification or warrant for Christian belief, they still have an important role to play.<sup>28</sup> He appeals to Calvin, and suggests that philosophical arguments can be helpful in the process of coming to belief and in the believer's struggle with doubt.<sup>29</sup> Sorting out just where Plantinga and Barth agree and disagree on the questions of natural theology and apologetics is complicated by two factors. The first difficulty is that it is not at all clear that even the most basic terms are being used in the same way by Barth and Plantinga. And second, their approach vectors to these issues are so different that the

<sup>24</sup> "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," 37.

<sup>25</sup> *CD I/1*, 30 (*KD I/1*, 28, "daß es sich über die Begründung seines Grundes, über Fragen wie: ob Gott ist, ob es eine Offenbarung gibt usw. in keine Diskussion einläßt"). We should not understand Barth here to forbid consideration, reflection on or speaking about the ground of theological knowing. It is rather that the ground of the knowledge of God is not *up for discussion*, uncertain and in need of defense. The knowledge of God is self-grounded in God's self-revealing act—end of discussion.

<sup>26</sup> *CD I/1*, 30 (*KD I/1*, 29, "Alle gewollte Apologetik und Polemik dagegen ist . . . notorisch noch immer ein unverantwortliches und ungegenwärtiges und darum auch unwirksames Tun gewesen").

<sup>27</sup> In Plantinga's reply to the critique of R. Douglas Geivett and Greg Jesson he clarifies that while apologetical arguments "are not necessary for rational faith . . . of course it doesn't follow for a moment that such apologetical work is inconsequential. It can be of use in many different and important ways: for example, in moving someone closer to the great things of the gospel. Such arguments can also provide confirmations, what John Calvin calls 'helps'" ("Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments For Christian Belief," *Philosophia Christi* 3, no. 2 [2001]: 384–385). For similar affirmations see "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," 217; and, "Rationality and Public Evidence: a Reply to Richard Swinburne," *Religious Studies* 37 (2001).

<sup>28</sup> "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," 39.

<sup>29</sup> "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," 40.

parallax mentioned earlier is nearly unavoidable. I will argue that there is a defensible way of interpreting Barth and Plantinga such that they are in fundamental continuity with each other and the Reformed tradition to which they belong.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, due to the complexity involved and given the acuteness and importance of the disagreement, a separate chapter, chapter 5, will be devoted to this subject.

Along with apologetics, Plantinga mentions philosophical theology as an important division of Christian philosophy. The very mention of philosophical theology raises important questions for the relationship between philosophy and theology. Plantinga defines philosophical theology as: “a matter of thinking about the central doctrines of the Christian faith from a philosophical perspective; it is a matter of employing the resources of philosophy to deepen our grasp and understanding of them.”<sup>31</sup> We have noted that, for Barth, theology cannot but engage with the tools, resources and language of philosophy, for theology is done “within the framework of philosophy.”<sup>32</sup> This raises the question: what theology is not philosophical theology? Is the Christian philosopher practicing philosophical theology really doing theology? If so, is theology properly understood as a branch of Christian philosophy?

A few observations will help to clarify where Plantinga and Barth stand with respect to these questions. Beginning with Plantinga, it is significant that he sees philosophical theology as important work for both Christian philosophers and theologians, adding that it would benefit from the coordinated involvement of both.<sup>33</sup> It also seems reasonable to conclude that, for Plantinga, as the name suggests, philosophical theology is theology. Plantinga, again, sees theology as the working out of what we know from the deliverances of faith, while Christian philosophy, in its constructive task, is working on the implications of what we know from the deliverances of faith for the questions in philosophy. Philosophical theology seen as theology, therefore, would be employing the

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<sup>30</sup> See *RGB*, 72, where Plantinga points out the fundamental agreement between Barth, Calvin, Kuyper and Bavinck, a text to which we will return to in chapter 5.

<sup>31</sup> “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 41.

<sup>32</sup> *SITet*, 27 (*SIT*, 57).

<sup>33</sup> Regarding philosophical theology undertaken by Christian philosophers, Plantinga states: “no doubt some of this work could profit from closer contact with what theologians know” (“Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 42). The study we are conducting here could be characterized as an effort in philosophical theology endeavoring to bring closer contact between Christian philosophy and theology.

resources of philosophy in the task of working out what we know from the deliverances of faith. Plantinga, however, describes philosophical theology as helping to clarify *the central doctrines of the Christian faith*. It is possible, therefore, that he understands philosophical theology to be one step removed from theology, clarifying what theology means in its clarifications of what we know from the deliverances of faith.<sup>34</sup> Philosophical theology viewed in this way would be a third-order reflection on a second-order reflection (theology) on the first-order knowledge of God given in faith. In either case, it seems clear that Plantinga does not think that all theology must be philosophical theology. Plantinga might agree with Barth that using the language and concepts of philosophy is unavoidable for the theologian, but he seems to have in mind here a particularly self-conscious, explicit and formal engagement with philosophical thought.

Turning to Barth, it is helpful to remember that his primary objection to philosophy is an objection to any attempt to replace theology's particular, intractable, God-given ground and starting point, with a general pseudo-ground established on human reason. Here, Barth and Plantinga are in complete agreement. Barth also agrees with Plantinga that theology and Christian philosophy may overlap and mutually inform.<sup>35</sup> He leaves the door open to the possibility of a philosophy that respects its boundaries and does not "subordinate theology to its own nexus of problems."<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it must be granted that the emphasis of Barth's thinking with respect to philosophical theology, like apologetics, is overwhelmingly negative. History teaches that going down this path nearly always results in a much too optimistic view of the capacity of human language, concepts and reason to grasp and independently convey divine truth. He worries that any positive assessment of the contribution of philosophy to theology may cause one to forget that,

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<sup>34</sup> Just how this 'clarifying' proceeds is of critical importance. Does philosophy actively shape content and meaning on the basis of its own independent criteria, or simply explore the implications and inner coherence of theology?

<sup>35</sup> Recall here Barth's observation of the "common difficult tasks" of philosophy and theology, and his suggestion that "the existence of the philosopher may be helpful to him [the theologian]" (*PTet*, 80, 93; *PT*, 94, 105).

<sup>36</sup> *CD* I/1, 39 (*KD* I/1, 39, "Also kann und will hier die Philosophie die Dogmatik nicht ihrem eigenen Problem-zusammenhang ein- und unterordnen"). This is from Barth's assessment of his brother Heinrich Barth's philosophy of existence, which—while he found it lamentably incautious at points—he praised saying: "We are given a philosophical scheme in which there is no place for an anthropological *prius* of faith and therefore for the patronizing and conditioning of theology which are not overcome in Heidegger or Bultmann."

“the intractability of faith and its object guarantees that divine certainty cannot become human security.”<sup>37</sup> Plantinga would no doubt disagree about just how negative history's lessons are regarding the relationship between philosophy and theology. At no point, however, is Plantinga in disagreement with Barth about the proper ordering or the potential trespasses of philosophy in the service of theology. In fact, Plantinga's work on the nature of Christian scholarship (as we have seen) and the epistemology of Christian belief (as we shall see) is aimed at undercutting the Cartesian/Lockean quest for a general, anthropological, and theologically neutral epistemic basis.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Nature of Truth and the Nature of Knowledge*

What has been given so far is a rather condensed account of Plantinga's views on Christian scholarship, but this should be sufficient to support a few key observations about Plantinga's thought. Plantinga's position on Christian scholarship is motivated by at least two commitments which are of fundamental importance to understanding his epistemology of Christian belief, one about the nature of truth and the other about the nature of knowledge. Regarding truth, Plantinga asserts that the Christian perspective entails a commitment to the unitary, universal and objective nature of truth. We can distinguish this view from two confused though popular rivals. The first rival is a version of the Ritschlian dualism that Barth rejected. Plantinga would find no reason to accept a *Natur/Geist* disjunction of the realms of faith and reason. It is difficult to see whether the Ritschlian split is really a rival view of truth or simply the more popular notion that Christianity makes only ethical, and not metaphysical claims.<sup>39</sup> In either case Plantinga

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<sup>37</sup> CD I/1, 13 (KD I/1, 11, “Die Unverfügbarkeit des Glaubens und seines Gegenstandes soll und wird dafür sorgen, daß aus der göttlichen Gewißheit keine menschliche Sicherheit werden kann”). This is precisely the concern which motivates him to reject “a philosophical theology or theological philosophy in which the attempt would be made to reason ‘theonomously.’” “All that men may here and now undertake is *human* theology. . . . *theologia ektypa viatorum*, theology typical not of God but of man” (Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: an Introduction* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963], 113–114). See also CD I/1, 269 (KD I/1, 285).

<sup>38</sup> D. Z. Phillips attacks Plantinga's position on just this point, noting that Plantinga has abandoned the modern ideal of “disinterested enquiry” (“Advice to Philosophers who are Christians,” *New Blackfriars* 69, no. 820 [1988]: 426–430).

<sup>39</sup> One way to understand the Ritschlian split is as a kind of factual dualism where spiritual truths and natural truths both apply simultaneously. It is spiritually or ethically true that God created the world,

does not countenance this division, Christian truth claims have implications for the natural sciences as well as ethical theory. The second rival view of truth is subjective relativism, where truth is multiple, individual and subjectively determined. Plantinga excoriates relativism in his critiques of *creative anti-realism*. Creative anti-realism suggests that there is no reality *per se* independent of the thinking human subject. Human thought is what creates and determines reality.<sup>40</sup> Like Barth, Plantinga rejects any thorough-going idealism<sup>41</sup> of this kind, as “incompatible with Christianity.”<sup>42</sup> If the existence of all things is dependent on our noetic activity then “in a stunning reversal of roles, [God] would owe his existence to us.”<sup>43</sup> Plantinga also considers this view to suffer from “deep problems with self-referential incoherence.”<sup>44</sup> However, it is significant that his critique aimed at its logical inadequacy appears to be secondary to his concern that creative anti-realism is not a neutral option, but rather wholly inimical to the Christian view.<sup>45</sup> In a statement that resonates with Barth’s affirmation of an essential realism, Plantinga reasons:

Clearly one of the deepest impulses in Christian thought is the idea that there really is such a person as God, who has established the world a

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while it is naturally true that the world is uncreated. Under this view, truth is not necessarily subjective, but it is nevertheless a form of relativism if we suppose that there can be a real contradiction of meaning in two true propositions. The more popular interpretation is just to reduce Christian truth claims to merely ethical propositions, but this then shifts us to a question about the nature of Christian truth claims and not about the nature of truth and reality itself.

<sup>40</sup> Plantinga does allow, however, for a *divine* creative anti-realism. See his “How to be an Anti-Realist,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56, no. 1 (1982): 68-70.

<sup>41</sup> Plantinga traces creative anti-realism back to the ancients, but credits its popularity and influence with a particular understanding of Kantian idealism. Whether or not this is the correct interpretation of Kant is beside the point. Plantinga gladly concedes that, “Kant himself did not take creative anti-realism globally and neat. . . . No doubt there are restrictions of Kantian creative anti-realism that are compatible with Christianity, and ought to be explored as among the possibilities as to how things are” (“Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 33). Plantinga also explores alternative interpretations of Kant in the first chapter of *WCB*.

<sup>42</sup> “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 32.

<sup>43</sup> “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 33.

<sup>44</sup> “The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship: 1989 Stob Lectures,” 131.

<sup>45</sup> “The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship: 1989 Stob Lectures,” 132.

certain way: there really is a correct or right way of looking at things; this is the way God looks at things.<sup>46</sup>

There is, therefore, no room on Plantinga's view for the possibility that propositions about God and the world might be personally true for the Christian, but not publicly true for the scholar. Often popular postmodern thought embraces this kind of personal relativism.<sup>47</sup> But postmodern intuitions are not all wrong in Plantinga's judgment. After all, central to postmodernism is a critique of Enlightenment modernism's commitment to classical foundationalism with all of the requirements discussed in the second chapter, including the *accessibility requirement*. This is the welcome critique of the possibility of autonomous, neutral human objectivity. This is also the *critical* aspect of Barth's *critical realism*, namely, the chastening of idealism which highlights the limits of independent human knowing from-below. Plantinga, with his powerful critique of classical foundationalism, seems wholeheartedly to agree.<sup>48</sup>

By encouraging Christian academics to approach their disciplines with the assumption of the truth of Christian belief, Plantinga is allied with Barth and shares the intolerant chastisements which Barth receives from Harnack and Pannenberg. Presuming the Christian point of view, it is alleged, is a baleful transgression of the foundational principle of academic neutrality upon which the progress of universal human knowledge depends. Such a retreat to Christian ghettos, amounts to a blind fideism, a hopeless subjectivism and, worst of all, as Peter van Ness worries, "raise[s] specters of Christian

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<sup>46</sup> "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," 35.

<sup>47</sup> It is worth noting that the kind of postmodernism embraced by the likes of Walter Lowe, Graham Ward and William Stacy Johnson is skeptical not of the notion that there really is a way that things are and an objective truth about it, but rather about the possibility of human access to that truth. Grenz and Franke remind us that "the wholesale identification of the term postmodern with radical relativism . . . is simply too narrow to do justice to the actual breadth of the phenomenon" (Stanley Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 1st ed. [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], 19).

<sup>48</sup> Plantinga points out that a critical recognition of the Enlightenment's mistaken optimism in human objectivity is hardly news to his own theological tradition. This critique "would of course have received the enthusiastic support of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd" ("Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," 35). Wolterstorff makes the observation that long before Barth, Kuyper arrived at postmodern views regarding autonomous human objectivity ("What New Haven and Grand Rapids Have to Say to Each Other: 1992 Stob Lectures," in *Seeking Understanding: The Stob Lectures, 1986–1998* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 278).

triumphalism.”<sup>49</sup> Plantinga's response is also similar to Barth's, just as it is aligned with Plantinga's Dutch ascendants Bavink and Kuyper.<sup>50</sup> Human knowers occupy a stance of epistemic dependence. There simply is no privileged, neutral point of view, as this critique with all its resonating hopefulness invariably assumes. However, it quite obviously does not follow from the fact that humans have no independent objective access to the truth, that truth must therefore be a subjective human construction.<sup>51</sup> Nor does it follow that a lack of guaranteed and demonstrable certainty about the truth we believe we know undermines the validity of our natural conviction that we do indeed have at least approximate knowledge of the objective truth.

This last observation provides a nice bridge into the second motivating conviction for Plantinga's charge to Christian scholars, one having to do with the nature of knowing. But before plunging head-first into his epistemology of Christian belief, let us take brief stock of what has been observed so far. Already in Plantinga's views on Christian scholarship there is a strong indication that he agrees with Barth's rejection of the three interconnected facets of Enlightenment modernism discussed in the second chapter. Like Barth, Plantinga's view is properly understood as a kind of critical realism.<sup>52</sup> He begins his defense of this view arguing first from the implications of what is known by Christian faith. He in no way accepts the *obligation assumption*, which would require the scholar to demonstrate the legitimacy of Christian knowledge claims, nor does he grant the *general starting-point assumption*, with its stipulation that one may only proceed from knowledge claims that are generally accepted within the broader academy.<sup>53</sup> He critiques classical

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<sup>49</sup> Peter H. van Ness, “Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers,” review of *Philosophers Who Believe*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (1996): 889.

<sup>50</sup> This is especially true for our knowledge of God, where, as Kuyper advises, “man no longer stands *above*, but *beneath* the object of his investigation, and over against this object he finds himself in a position of entire *dependence*” (Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1899], 248).

<sup>51</sup> Plantinga quips, “As you have no doubt noticed, this is a whopping *non sequitur*; that hasn't curbed its popularity in the least” (“Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 34).

<sup>52</sup> Which affirms both the underlying reality of the object of knowing, and recognizes the active and constitutive role of noetic processes in the shaping of knowledge.

<sup>53</sup> Worthy of particular note for our interests is Plantinga's conclusion that Christian biblical scholars should not be limited by only what can be known through “ordinary scientific investigation” (“Sheehan's Shenanigans: How Theology Becomes Tomfoolery,” *The Reformed Journal* April [1987]: 25). See also his arguments against the stipulations of Troeltschian historical biblical criticism, in *WCB*, 412–421.

foundationalism's *accessibility requirement*, which sought truth-validation of belief from an independent human epistemic footing. He therefore recognizes the validity of critical idealism's critique of objective human certainty;<sup>54</sup> but does so without abandoning realism's commitment to a unitary, universal and objective reality—a reality that is only known with objective certainty by God. What Plantinga also does, that Barth does not do, is point out the logical inconsistency in the creative anti-realist and relativist positions.

Plantinga takes a fundamentally realist stance, affirming that there is a truth to be known about the world and about God. This truth is objective in that it is “the way God looks at things.” The impossibility of *independent* human objectivity does not count against the possibility of a genuine human knowledge of that truth. While Plantinga never says as much, the implication of his position is that genuine human knowledge of God is in some way a participation in the way God looks at himself. The task before us as we move into a consideration of Plantinga's epistemology is to discern just how compatible it is with Barth's from-above theo-foundationalism where the security of the gift of faith rests in the Giver and not in the earthen vessel such that our theological knowing remains *theologia ektypa viatorum*.

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<sup>54</sup> *Certainty* is a notion with two senses that can be quite unhelpfully ambiguous if not properly distinguished. In the sense of confidence or credence, *certainty* indicates maximal credence in or commitment to a particular belief. In the sense of clarity or infallibility, *certainty* indicates that one could not be mistaken. It is this ambiguity and the inadequacy of infallibility as an epistemic ideal that leads Esther Meek to commend *confidence* over *certainty* (Esther L. Meek, *Longing to Know* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2003], 137–140). It is important to see that it is possible to have an undoubting confidence in one's belief, without pretending to see how it is impossible that one's belief could fail to be true. In other words, it is possible to rightly believe without doubt that a belief is true, without being able to demonstrate how it could not be false. The possibility that all knowledge is infected with error (uncertain), does not necessarily invalidate the propriety of being maximally convinced (certain) that something we believe we know is true. Christian belief is consistent with doubt about all human knowing while affirming the power of God to affirm to us the truth of our belief, despite our noetic fallibility. As we will soon see from Plantinga, the key question with respect to propriety is what warrants our belief. I will argue that for both Barth and Plantinga, maximal conviction in our theological beliefs is always only warranted by the top-down action of divine revelation. For more on believing and knowing what we know is true, see Plantinga, “Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments For Christian Belief,” 386–387.



## ***Plantinga's Epistemology and Warrant***

It might be considered foolhardy to attempt a condensed summary of Plantinga's work in epistemology, not only because of its breadth and depth, but also because, in general, epistemology is so conceptually challenging.<sup>55</sup> My aim here will need to be the more modest undertaking of clarifying for our particular question the central pivot points and the cumulative import of a thousand deft, nimble, and cogent moves. We are helped immensely in this thanks to the painstaking clarity of Plantinga's writing. But the warning remains that these are deeply troubled waters; and despite Plantinga's best efforts, many—even of his admirer's—have found it easy to misunderstand him at points. We will begin with an exploration of Plantinga's general account of how our beliefs might have *warrant*. Here we will highlight Plantinga's recognition that the possibility of human knowledge requires the purposive arrangement of elements both external and internal to our own noetic equipment. For Plantinga, knowledge, which is more than mere true belief, cannot originate *from below*.

### *Why Warrant*

Possibly the most significant distinction that Plantinga draws in his epistemological work is between the notions of warrant, justification and rationality. Failure to appreciate the importance of the differences in Plantinga's employment of these notions for understanding his contributions to epistemology is one of the most common mistakes made by Plantinga critics.<sup>56</sup> Internalist and evidentialist critics, for instance, are inclined

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<sup>55</sup> As Plantinga notes: "Epistemology is extremely difficult, in many ways more difficult than, say, the metaphysics of modality. The latter requires a fair amount of logical acumen; but it is reasonably easy to see what the basic concepts are and how they are related. Not so for epistemology. *Warrant, justification, evidence, epistemic normativity, probability, rationality*—these are all extremely difficult notions. Indeed, each of those terms is really associated with a whole class of difficult and analogically related notions, where a big part of the difficulty is discerning how the members of each class are related to each other and to the members of the other classes. Coming to clarity on them and their relatives and discerning the relations among them is strenuous and demanding; yet it is the only way to progress in epistemology" (*WCD*, vi).

<sup>56</sup> See Evan Fales, review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, *Noûs* 37, no. 2 (2003); Richard Feldman, "Proper Functionalism," *Noûs* 27, no. 1 (1993); R. Douglas Geivett and Greg Jesson, "Plantinga's Externalism and the Terminus of Warrant-Based Epistemology," *Philosophia Christi* 3, no. 2 (2001); Timothy McGrew and Lydia McGrew, "On the Historical Argument: A Rejoinder to Plantinga," *Philosophia*

to reduce the question of *warrant* to the question of *justification* conceived of in terms of fulfilling one's duty vis-à-vis accessible public or private evidence. A chief aim of Plantinga's *Warrant* trilogy, however, is to challenge the assumption that *justification* so conceived is either sufficient or even necessary for one's beliefs to have *warrant*.<sup>57</sup> He argues, in addition, that Christian belief cannot be challenged as irrational or unjustified.<sup>58</sup> Everything hinges on whether or not Christian belief has warrant, which ultimately hinges on whether or not Christian belief is true.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, a successful argument against the adequacy of Christian belief in general would have to target the truth of the belief itself.

What then is *warrant* in Plantingian parlance? The oft repeated definition in fullest form: "warrant is a normative, possibly complex quantity that comes in degrees, enough of which is what distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief."<sup>60</sup> A near consensus in epistemology, though largely implicit until Gettier,<sup>61</sup> is that in order for a belief to count

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*Christi* 8, no. 1 (2006); Philip Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (1985); and, Richard G. Swinburne, "Plantinga on Warrant," review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, *Religious Studies* 37 (2001). What is often missing in these critiques is real engagement with Plantinga's argument against accepting internalist justification as necessary and sufficient for warrant.

<sup>57</sup> This is dealt with most comprehensively in *WCD*. See especially chapter 2: "Classical Chisholmian Internalism."

<sup>58</sup> Rationality for Plantinga has to do with the proper functioning of our reason in the apprehension of experience, the formation of belief, etc. (*WCB*, 110–112), while justification is taken to refer to the epistemic duties we must fulfill to be within our epistemic rights to hold a belief (*WCB*, 99–102).

<sup>59</sup> *WCB*, 187–189.

<sup>60</sup> *WCD*, 4. Plantinga traces the distinction between the notions of warrant and justification back to Locke. This emerges in his "Justification in the 20th Century," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, Supplement (1990): 52.

<sup>61</sup> In three pages, Edmund Gettier's "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," *Analysis* 23 (1963), both made explicit the *justified true belief* theory of knowledge and cast serious doubt upon it. "It is almost as if a distinguished critic created a tradition in the very act of destroying it" (*WCD*, 6). Gettier was one of Plantinga's most influential colleagues in the Wayne State philosophy department, given special mention in the original preface to *God and Other Minds* (xvii). Plantinga has often commented on the uniqueness of Gettier's three page piece in the ratio of its pages to the number of pages it has provoked. See especially "Self-Profile," 28–29. Although Gettier's work has been pressed by Plantinga into the service of philosophical arguments that defend the possibility that Christian belief has warrant, Gettier himself strongly rejected Christian belief. Plantinga notes that, while at Wayne State, Gettier attacked his Christianity "with great verve and power" ("A Christian Life Partly Lived," in *Philosophers Who*

as genuine knowledge it must fulfill three essential requirements. It must of course be believed, it must in fact be true, and thirdly, there must be some connection between the way in which the belief arises and the truth of what is being believed—you can't just get lucky. This third requirement, which connects belief formation to truth is commonly expressed as *justification*. Putting all three requirements together we arrive at the *justified-true-belief* theory of knowledge. Plantinga, however, after a long hard look at the range of what epistemologists tend to mean by justification, argues that justification does not adequately address the concern for the connectedness of belief formation and truth. In other words, justification in its common construals does not adequately distinguish knowledge from mere true belief.<sup>62</sup> An alternative to *justification* is needed and Plantinga calls it *warrant*.<sup>63</sup> In order to appreciate the need for a new term and an alternative to traditional notions of justification in knowledge, we would do well to peel back another layer and look a bit closer at Plantinga's critique.

Where Plantinga and the vast majority of epistemologists throughout history are in agreement is that knowledge requires something more than belief and a belief's happening to be true. If the truth of belief candidates were absolutely transparent, obvious and somehow guaranteed, then a third requirement might not be necessary. To know something implies that there is some non-accidental connection between belief formation and truth—something in the process that generates belief so that it is the truth of what is being believed and not something else that is motivating the believing.<sup>64</sup> This, therefore, is what we are after in our search for a proper third requirement for knowledge, a dependable, non-accidental connection between belief formation and truth. Where Plantinga takes exception with the diverse tradition is in his contention that most notions of justification do not provide either what is sufficient or what is necessary for a dependable, non-accidental connection between belief formation and truth—i.e.

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*Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers*, ed. Kelly James Clark [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993], 64).

<sup>62</sup> We shall see below that Plantinga uses *justification* primarily to refer to the rights and duties of belief, i.e. deontology.

<sup>63</sup> Plantinga originally opted for Roderick Chisholm's expression calling it 'positive epistemic status,' but later explains that that was just too cumbersome a term. He also mentions Ernest Sosa's 'epistemic aptness' as a synonym for warrant that has less deontological baggage (*WCD*, 4–5).

<sup>64</sup> Plantinga helpfully points out that often the aim of belief in a case of knowledge is better understood as *verisimilitude* rather than *truth*. The aim may not be the production of a veridical proposition, but rather the generation of conceptions that are accurate depictions of reality (*WPF*, 43).

warrant.<sup>65</sup> Plantinga takes a penetrating look at the notions of justification on offer and consistently comes back to two key problems.

### *The Failure of Epistemic Justification*

*Warrant: The Current Debate* is the place to find Plantinga's most sustained treatment of the various proposals made to address the elusive third requirement in knowledge. He takes a systematic look at various notions of the importance of and relationship between: justification, rationality, evidence, epistemic duty, coherence, etc. Informed by attention to its origins in Descartes and Locke, Plantinga undertakes a percipient examination of epistemic internalism. Internalism affirms what we have called the *accessibility requirement*.<sup>66</sup> "The basic thrust of internalism in epistemology . . . is that the properties that confer warrant upon a belief are properties to which the believer has some sort of special epistemic access."<sup>67</sup> Plantinga's *ad fontes* argument is that internalism is motivated by an underlying commitment to a deontological conception of justification—where justification consists in doing one's epistemic duty, variously construed. In terms of our discussion with Karl Barth, it is appropriate to note that justification so construed is a decidedly *from below* approach to knowing. As Plantinga suggests, "here our destiny is entirely in our own hands."<sup>68</sup> As an account of warrant, it is a veritable epistemic works

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<sup>65</sup> Plantinga's analysis of warrant is approached inductively, by taking largely agreed instances of knowledge, and critically, by highlighting the weaknesses in alternative accounts. In Plantinga's view, it is simply a matter of the way things are that a concise definition of necessary and sufficient conditions for warrant is not possible. "This is a way in which philosophy differs from mathematics; . . . Our concept of warrant is too complex to yield to analysis by way of a couple of austere elegant clauses" (*WPF*, ix). The inductive approach is also his tact in the analysis of proper basicity. See Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," *Noûs* 15 (1981): 50.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Moser expresses this internalist requirement as being "capable of calling to attention evidence which justifies the proposition" being believed. He, therefore, determines that "externalism falls short of capturing the primary sense of 'justified belief'" (Paul K. Moser, *Empirical Justification*, Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy; V. 34 [Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1985], 246, 248). It is the appropriateness of this sense of justification as a criteria for knowledge that Plantinga critiques.

<sup>67</sup> *WCD*, 6. Paul Helm mistakenly argues that Plantinga's externalism is "logically parasitic on some form of internalism." This conclusion only follows because Helm places internalist constraints on what could serve to warrant externalism when this is exactly what the debate itself hinges on (review of *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function*, *Religious Studies* 31 [1995]: 133).

<sup>68</sup> *WCD*, 15.

righteousness, where what principally matters is the conscientious discharge of duty. In the case of evidentialism, this is the duty to proportion belief to the evidence. Plantinga characterizes the attitude this way: "I may be wholly and hopelessly deceived. Even so, I can still do my epistemic duty; I can still do my best; I can still be above reproach."<sup>69</sup> The duty of the internalist, however, is to do everything possible not to be deceived. A thoroughgoing internalist, therefore, might only count as knowledge a belief that is based on evidence, the grounding truth of which is directly, internally apprehended or apprehensible.<sup>70</sup> Plantinga maintains, that it is the notion of duty undergirding internalism, that is its chief motivator—without which internalism of any variety loses its drive.<sup>71</sup> From this root, he goes on to trace the development of various alternative construals of justification, some internalist, others externalist.<sup>72</sup> In each case he explains that the proposals fail to serve as adequate accounts of how our beliefs could have warrant. He employs a number of criticisms and counterexamples to cast doubt on each of the warrant candidates. In almost every case, however, he returns to one or more of the following three problems. First, there are counterexamples which point out that the proposal in question does not give us enough to distinguish knowledge from mere true belief. Then, there are counterexamples in which the proposed requirement would not even be necessary for warrant. And finally, Plantinga notes that many of the proposals misconstrue the relationship between warrant and belief, and cannot account for the important fact that warrant comes in degrees. We will examine each of these briefly, giving us an opportunity to illuminate Plantinga's alternative in the light of his critiques.

### *The Failure of Epistemic Justification: Degrees of Warrant*

Starting with the last first, some versions of justification fail to grasp that what is conferred is a "quantity that comes in degrees."<sup>73</sup> Warrant is not an all-or-nothing,

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<sup>69</sup> WCD, 15.

<sup>70</sup> The representatives of evidentialist internalism highlighted by Plantinga are Earl Conee and Richard Feldman. See especially Earl Conee, "The Basic Nature of Epistemic Justification," *Monist* 71, no. 3 (1988); and, Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 48, no. 1 (1985).

<sup>71</sup> "Internalism flows from deontology and is unmotivated without it" WCD, 29.

<sup>72</sup> A nice summary of the various combinations and permutations of the warrant candidates Plantinga has considered is found in the opening to WPF, 3.

<sup>73</sup> WCD, 4.

Boolean value; it can be acquired at varying strengths.<sup>74</sup> There is a threshold, though not quantitatively defined, at which warrant becomes strong enough to serve, with belief and truth, as the third criteria for knowledge. The notion that warrant comes in degrees is, for Plantinga, an obvious fact, one related to the observation that our beliefs come in degrees of strength.<sup>75</sup> Part of the significance of Plantinga's observation about gradations of warrant is the relationship between warrant and belief. While Plantinga offers no precise account of this relationship he does affirm that when things are working properly, "in the typical case, the degree to which I believe a given proposition will be proportional to the degree it has of warrant."<sup>76</sup> So close is the link that Plantinga can assert: "the degree of warrant [a belief] enjoys depends on the strength of the belief."<sup>77</sup> Such an assertion, however, could easily be misinterpreted. Is Plantinga really suggesting that we control the warrant for our beliefs by regulating the strength of our convictions? And, if not, then is warrant something that we independently perceive, to which we accordingly adjust the firmness of our beliefs? Either interpretation is ruled out by Plantinga's views on the nature of belief formation, seen particularly in his notion of the operation of *internal rationality* and his rejection of strict *doxastic voluntarism*.

Internal rationality is concerned with forming the right beliefs on the basis of experience. In many cases, however, the function of internal rationality does not involve deliberation—reflecting on the nature of the experience and deciding on that basis what to believe and how firmly. Often times, as when reflecting on our memories, we simply find ourselves in possession of a belief. The belief "seems *right, acceptable, natural*; it forces itself upon you; it seems somehow inevitable."<sup>78</sup> Theories of justification must be able to account for the phenomenology of belief—for the fact that our beliefs and their relative strengths are not (at least not entirely) in our control. Plantinga recognizes this, and, therefore, rejects the notion that our beliefs are determined by deliberative choice. This rejection of strict doxastic voluntarism has led some to conclude that Plantinga's

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<sup>74</sup> The inability to deal adequately with this phenomenon of warrant is part of Plantinga's critiques of Laurence Bonjour's coherentism, John Pollock's epistemic norms and Alvin Goldman's reliabilism (*WCD*, 109–111, 169, 198–199, 209).

<sup>75</sup> *WCD*, 109; *WPF*, 9; *WCB*, 114.

<sup>76</sup> *WPF*, 9.

<sup>77</sup> *WCB*, 156.

<sup>78</sup> *WCB*, 110–112.

epistemology is 'nonvoluntarist' to the extreme.<sup>79</sup> On this view, one's beliefs are entirely determined by external factors, such that warrant becomes a matter of luck. These critiques miss their mark quite simply because Plantinga does maintain a place for deliberative choice in belief formation. The role of deliberative choice, however, is not primary for warrant. It is perfectly consistent with Plantinga's model that a person willfully resist the formation of right belief and thereby sabotage the proper functioning of their own cognitive processes.<sup>80</sup> While willful resistance may undermine warrant, however, choosing to believe does not convey warrant.

Pressing Plantinga on the nature of belief formation with respect to the transfer of warrant raises interesting questions. Where does warrant ultimately come from and what explains its gradation? In many of Plantinga's examples we are clearly in a position of epistemic dependence with regard to warrant. Warrant appears to be somehow given. He maintains that these examples are an indication that we neither do nor could provide the grounds or conditions for the warrant for our own beliefs. Instead he proposes that there must be an ultimate external grounding that provides a purposive connection between belief formation and truth—"a design plan successfully aimed at truth." What warrants our beliefs is that they are formed properly according to this designed connection to truth.<sup>81</sup> We are dependent on both an environment and cognitive faculties oriented toward and functioning in accordance with this plan. This means that there are a number of different factors that could impact the degree of warrant enjoyed by a belief. On the one hand, degree of warrant can be affected by malfunction. In the case of malfunction, of course, the actual degree of warrant could only be reduced, not increased. It might be the case that, due to some defect in my internal rationality, I fail to believe with the

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<sup>79</sup> See Laura L. Garcia, "Natural Theology and the Reformed Objection," in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 121–122; Linda Zagzebski, "Religious Knowledge and the Virtues of the Mind," in *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 202; and, Keith A. Mascord, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 181–182, 198.

<sup>80</sup> Plantinga notes that proper function may be "impeded and overridden by lust, ambition, greed, selfishness. . ." (*WCB*, 151).

<sup>81</sup> The specification of a design plan aimed at truth meets John Pollock's concern for 'reason-guiding' epistemic norms and thereby refutes Pollock's argument against externalism (John L. Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, Rowman & Littlefield Texts in Philosophy [Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1986], 124–126).

appropriate strength.<sup>82</sup> This would, in effect, diminish the warrant transferred to the belief. If, however, I believed with more strength than was in fact proportionate to the warrant being transferred, I would not thereby increase the warrant of the belief.

So there is an important link between the strength of belief and the degree of warrant. To clarify further, the regulation of the strength of our belief is not a response to the warrant transferred, but part (maybe the last part) of the process of warrant transfer in the formation of the belief. Consider the question of whether maximal warrant for a belief could be transferred to us and, nevertheless, we find ourselves with a low degree of confidence in it? This is technically not possible in Plantinga's conceptuality of warrant and belief formation, because warrant is not transferred to *us* but to our *beliefs*. Part of the transfer of warrant is allocating the appropriate strength of belief. The basis for that strength may have to do with the clarity and/or proper functioning of our apprehension of experience,<sup>83</sup> but, the destination of warrant is the belief itself. Depending on the suitability of environment and cognitive function oriented toward and functioning according to the designed connection between belief formation and truth—if everything is properly oriented and functioning—the full degree of warrant being transferred will, without attenuation or intensification, be reflected in and finally established by the proper proportionate strength of belief.<sup>84</sup> If that degree of warrant is high enough then the belief qualifies as knowledge.<sup>85</sup> As far as other theories of justification go, they are deficient to

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<sup>82</sup> Plantinga distinguishes different *propositional attitudes* which amount to varying degrees of confidence that a proposition is true. If confidence is strong enough we call it belief (*WPF*, 166). See also his discussion on Chisholm's "terms of epistemic appraisal" (*WCD*, 31).

<sup>83</sup> This is what Plantinga calls *external rationality*, referring to our part in the formation of experience, both sensuous experience upon which perceptual beliefs are based and doxastic experience upon which beliefs from the likes of memory and a priori reason are based.

<sup>84</sup> In a parallel discussion on the objective conditional probability of a proposition, Plantinga maintains that a successful design plan would aim to match our propositional attitude with objective probability (*WPF*, 166).

<sup>85</sup> It is worth noting here that one of the particularities of Plantinga's warrant alternative to traditional notions of justification is that warrant as a third criteria actually subsumes the other two, belief and truth. It is impossible for a belief to have a high degree of warrant and not be believed, and indeed believed strongly. Also, given the necessity for warrant of environmentally suited and properly functioning processes operating according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth, it is impossible for a belief to have a high degree of warrant and be false. Therefore, in Plantinga's scheme, a high degree of warrant is the sufficient condition for knowledge. For a dissenting view, see Richard Greene and N. A. Balmert, "Two Notions of Warrant and Plantinga's Solution to the Gettier Problem," *Analysis* 57, no. 2 (1997).



the extent that they cannot accommodate the fact that warrant is a *quantity that comes in degrees*.

### *The Failure of Epistemic Justification: Insufficient Criteria*

We now turn to the two most significant reasons Plantinga gives for re-thinking what might give our beliefs positive epistemic status, beginning with the problem of the insufficiency of the criteria for justification. The insufficiency of most construals of justification for warrant is highlighted in situations where, despite fulfilling (by most accounts) one's epistemic duties, there occurs some kind of deception, mistake or malfunction in the process. A favorite sub-group of such counterexamples are *Gettier problems*.<sup>86</sup> In every Gettier-like example<sup>87</sup> there is an instance of belief that happens to be true for which there appears to be justification, and yet the belief clearly fails to be an instance of knowledge.<sup>88</sup> The justified true belief is enabled by a justified false belief.<sup>89</sup> The belief happens to be true even though the work done by the justification has failed; and, the fact that the belief is true is actually against all odds.<sup>90</sup> One popular Gettier-like situation, found prior to Gettier, is Bertrand Russell's clock: "If you look at a clock which you believe to be going, but which in fact has stopped, and you happen to look at it at a moment when it is right, you will acquire a true belief as to the time of day, but you cannot be correctly said to have knowledge."<sup>91</sup> Russell was not pressing the point of justification, but his example has been used to show that a true belief, justified by the available evidence is not sufficient for knowledge. The supposed justification has failed, and the fact that the belief is nevertheless true is a *felix culpa*. Gettier, by way of

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<sup>86</sup> "What Gettier points out, of course, is that belief, truth and justification are not sufficient for knowledge" (WPF, 32).

<sup>87</sup> The credit here goes largely to Gettier, though Plantinga appeals to several Gettier-like examples that come from others. Plantinga specifically mentions examples taken from Keith Lehrer, Carl Ginet and Bertrand Russell.

<sup>88</sup> In Linda Zagzebski's analysis of Gettier examples, "what generates the problem for JTB, then, is that an accident of bad luck is cancelled out by an accident of good luck" ("The Inescapability of Gettier Problems," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 174 [1994]: 66).

<sup>89</sup> WPF, 32.

<sup>90</sup> As Plantinga puts it, "these beliefs could *much better* have been false" (WPF, 33).

<sup>91</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Limits* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1948), 113, cf. 170–171.

counterexample, shows that what we have called the *accessibility requirement* is not sufficient for knowledge. As Plantinga puts it, “the essence of the Gettier problem is that it shows internalist epistemologies to be wanting.”<sup>92</sup> Gettier problems are for Plantinga a decisive blow to typical accounts of knowledge and justification, but they point to an even larger looming problem for such accounts. Gettier examples turn on a minor mistake, so minor that the common internalist proposal might comfortably allow a bit of Gettier-slippage or, with a Gettier exception clause, rest content that the internalist approach is *nearly* correct. But, instead of a minor mistake, what about the possibility of large-scale epistemic deception or malfunction?

Internalism, in its various forms, makes justification dependent on the likes of doing one's duty,<sup>93</sup> maintaining a coherent set of beliefs,<sup>94</sup> satisfying the constraints of Bayesianism,<sup>95</sup> having the right epistemic norms,<sup>96</sup> etc. But these criteria are quite plainly inadequate in cognitive environments that are massively misleading, or in situations where one's own cognitive equipment is not functioning properly. We might either be subject to some kind of imperceptible external deception, as in the case of the Cartesian

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<sup>92</sup> WPF, 36.

<sup>93</sup> WCD, 15–25. Descartes and Locke are given as the progenitors.

<sup>94</sup> WCD, 87–113. See especially Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1985). Kvanvig argues against the view that in coherentism all beliefs are basic, but fails to challenge the problems Plantinga raises with respect to proper function and truth (Jonathan L. Kvanvig, “In Defense of Coherentism,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 22 [1997]: 299–306). Shogenji considers the problem of the possibility of malfunction or a misleading cognitive environment where coherent beliefs are less likely to be true. He concludes that coherence may play a significant role in the transfer of warrant (what he calls ‘channeling of justification’); however, he agrees with Plantinga that coherence among beliefs does not provide warrant (Tomoji Shogenji, “The Role of Coherence in Epistemic Justification,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 1 [2001]).

<sup>95</sup> WCD, 114–131. Plantinga finds the term ‘probabilistic coherentism’ to be the best description of Bayesianism. Plantinga entertains Bayesian Coherentism, but Bayesian probability theory is also the staple of some foundationalist evidentialists. E.g., Timothy and Lydia McGrew, “Strong Foundationalism and Bayesianism” (paper presented at the Formal Epistemology Workshop, UC-Berkeley, May 25–28, 2006); and, Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 102–110.

<sup>96</sup> WCD, 162–181. Pollock is particularly in mind.

demon or any variant of the brain-in-a-vat scenario;<sup>97</sup> or alternatively, we might have an undetectable defect in our cognitive faculties, as in the case of the Cartesian madman or Plantinga's Epistemically Inflexible Climber.<sup>98</sup> In all of these cases there is an impact either to the formation of the experience that presents itself to us or there is an impact to the production of belief on the basis of that experience.<sup>99</sup> Unlike Gettier problems, what challenges justification in these situations is not the possibility of an unlucky mistake, but the possibility of wholesale epistemic unreliability that is entirely beyond our ability to detect or manage. While the examples Plantinga gives are imaginative, colorful and humorous, the epistemic blind-spots they expose are to be taken quite seriously. They reveal, not merely a potential for deception or malfunction but a situation of radical epistemic dependence, where the justification-criteria for knowledge—that which connects the way in which a belief arises and the truth of what is being believed—is finally outside of our control. The affinity with Barth on epistemic dependence should be clear; our theory of warrant cannot proceed unilaterally from below. In *Warrant: the Current Debate* Plantinga finds that the positive contemporary proposals for what warrants belief fail to recognize the prominent role of proper function,<sup>100</sup> an essential element of warrant that is outside of our control. *Warrant and Proper Function* is given primarily to developing this notion.

### *The Failure of Epistemic Justification: Unnecessary Criteria*

So, one of the major problems with contemporary views of justification is that, by ignoring our epistemic dependence on the aptness of our cognitive environments and function, they do not provide sufficient conditions for warrant. But, in addition to being insufficiently prescriptive, they can also be seen to be unnecessarily proscriptive. There are after all several everyday cases of belief that we would all agree are instances of knowing for which most notions of justification are entirely irrelevant. In the

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<sup>97</sup> A favorite BIV scenario for Plantinga is of Alpha Centaurian cognitive superscientists who have the power to manipulate our cognitive faculties so that our beliefs are aimed not at truth but some other end. See *WCD*, 111–112, 129–131; *WPF*, 24, 28, 52, 58; *WCB*, 237.

<sup>98</sup> *WCD*, 82.

<sup>99</sup> Plantinga distinguishes between *external rationality*, which has to do with the formation of the right kind of experience, and *internal rationality*, which has to do with the production of the right beliefs on the basis of that experience (*WCB*, 110–112, 255–256).

<sup>100</sup> *WCD*, 212.

development of Plantinga's thought this takes us back to his first book devoted to a defense of Christian belief: *God and Other Minds*. He begins with an appraisal of the classical arguments of natural theology and natural atheology. He concludes that there are no non-circular arguments or evidence to support belief either for or against God. Under the common conception of justification, however, in the absence of a reason to support belief, belief must be withheld. At this stage Plantinga had not yet revived the lost distinction between warrant and justification. Nevertheless, the move he makes strikes at the reigning evidentialist, classical foundationalist criteria for justification. Plantinga suggests that our common and mostly uncontested belief in other minds is "in the same epistemological boat"<sup>101</sup> as belief in God. There is no non-circular argument or evidence to which we can appeal in support of our belief that there are other thinking beings. Therefore, if belief in other minds is rational, belief in God may be also.<sup>102</sup> In the 1960s Plantinga had not yet formulated his penetrating objections to classical foundationalism,<sup>103</sup> evidentialism and internalism's accessibility requirement; but he was already raising all of the questions.<sup>104</sup> The conclusion remains the same: fulfilling contemporary criteria for justification is in some cases unnecessary for a belief to count as knowledge. This led to his famous defenses of the proper basicity of belief in God,<sup>105</sup> to his dismantling of the evidentialist objection<sup>106</sup> and finally to his analysis and constructive

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<sup>101</sup> *GOM*, xvi.

<sup>102</sup> *GOM*, 271. This has been referred to as a 'permissive parity argument' (Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism*, Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy, vol. 28 [Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983], 150). It is important to see that Plantinga is not arguing that belief in God is true because it is like belief in other minds, only that there is no reason to disqualify its being accepted in the basic way if we allow that it is rational to accept belief in other minds in the basic way.

<sup>103</sup> As I point out in chapter 2, there is a dangerous ambiguity in our use of the term *foundation*. With respect to foundationalism, *foundation* refers to that set of our beliefs which is properly basic. When I use the term in the sense of theo-foundationalism, however, I mean to refer to the foundation underneath our foundational beliefs, to the undemonstrable anchor that secures the truth of our beliefs, that is—what ultimately serves to warrant our beliefs.

<sup>104</sup> Ironically, after raising these questions, Plantinga interjects, "These are obviously some of the most difficult and persistent problems of epistemology. A direct assault on them would be bold indeed, not to say foolhardy" (*GOM*, 188). Of course a direct assault is exactly what Plantinga went on to mount in "Is Belief in God Rational?," in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

<sup>105</sup> "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," (1981).

<sup>106</sup> *RBG*, (1983).

work on warrant. The list of counterexamples excluded under the criteria of deontological justification grew from belief in other minds, to also include: memory beliefs, perceptual judgments, a-priori intuitions and beliefs based on introspection, sympathy, moral sense, etc. Plantinga prefers to think of these beliefs as being generated by rational powers or faculties.<sup>107</sup> They are properly basic with respect to the foundations of our knowledge structures in that they are not based on inferences from other beliefs. Plantinga does not reject foundationalism *per se*.<sup>108</sup> He rejects classical varieties of foundationalism with their overly restrictive legitimizing criteria for basicity and failure to account for what warrants those beliefs.<sup>109</sup> In his constructive model for how Christian belief might have warrant, the means by which we *receive* the knowledge of God, are treated as analogous processes that deliver properly basic warranted belief independent of argument or evidence. The counterexamples of memory, introspection, etc. indicate that knowledge formed in this way is not necessarily deficient.<sup>110</sup> In many cases, for belief to have warrant, it is simply not required that—prior to assent—one fulfill epistemic obligations stipulated by a criteria of justification. What does, however, emerge on Plantinga's account is that the proper functioning of these faculties or processes is *necessary* (though not in and of itself sufficient) for warranting the beliefs they produce. This brings us back once again to the priority of our epistemic *dependence* on the aptness of environments and processes beyond our scope of management or direct perception. What we are specifically dependent on is the purposeful alignment of the contingent elements of our

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<sup>107</sup> See *WPF*, chapters 3–9; *WCB*, 145–148.

<sup>108</sup> Plantinga is often classed as a *modest* foundationalist, e.g. David K. Clark, “Faith and Foundationalism,” in *The Rationality of Theism*, eds. Paul K. Moser and Paul Copan (London: Routledge, 2003), 41. Though Plantinga demolishes strong foundationalism, Kevin Vanhoozer and Bruce Marshall are incorrect to assume that Plantinga is not still rightly considered a foundationalist in his view of the structure of knowledge with respect to basic beliefs. See Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 87; and, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 288.

<sup>109</sup> *RBG*, 55–63.

<sup>110</sup> When it comes to the knowledge of God, Plantinga argues that belief formed in the properly basic way is stronger than belief that depends upon inference (*WCB*, 304–306).

epistemic environments and processes such that they are, in Plantinga's words, "successfully aimed at truth."<sup>111</sup> Foremost, we are dependent on a design plan.

### *The Design Plan*

I have characterized the place of the *design plan* in Plantinga's notion of warrant as the ultimate external grounding that provides a purposive connection between belief formation and truth. Warrant is dependent first on this plan and next on cognitive environments and function aligned to it. *Design* may appear to be a theologically loaded term, one that directly implies God or at least a designer agent. Plantinga advises, however, that while design typically connotes "*conscious* design or purpose," it need not initially rule out the possibility that a design plan governing the proper operation of our cognitive faculties was generated by evolution without an origin in active, conscious, agency.<sup>112</sup> In other words, the fundamental account of warrant that Plantinga presents is not a particularly Christian account of warrant, nor does it even require theism. This fact alone should raise enormous suspicion about the compatibility of Plantinga's approach with that of Karl Barth. For Barth, we will recall, there is no movement that builds from a general epistemology to a Christian epistemology,<sup>113</sup> there is no clarity gained by standing outside of belief.<sup>114</sup> Earlier in this chapter, however, we concluded that Plantinga also rejects the *general starting-point assumption*. An oft made mistake in Plantinga interpretation is to assume that he is building a traditional-style deductive argument to the

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<sup>111</sup> E.g., one of Plantinga's earliest formulations of his warrant proposal, when he was still using Chisholm's term, *positive epistemic status*: "what confers positive epistemic status is one's cognitive faculties working properly or working as designed to work *insofar as that segment of design is aimed at producing true beliefs*" ("Justification and Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 4, no. 4 [1987], 414). In a more mature form: "a belief has warrant for a person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*'s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth" (*WCB*, 156).

<sup>112</sup> *WPF*, 20–21; *WCB*, 146. For a detailed analysis of design plan see *WPF*, 11–64.

<sup>113</sup> *CD I/1*, 190 (*KD I/1*, 198). See the discussion in chapter 2 on Barth's rejection of the *general starting-point assumption*.

<sup>114</sup> *CD I/1*, 30 (*KD I/1*, 29).

ultimate conclusion that Christian belief has warrant.<sup>115</sup> What Plantinga is doing is nearly the reverse. He is arguing, often inductively, that it is fallacious to require that Christian belief be built on deductive arguments from generally accessible grounds in order for it to have warrant. This does of course make a contribution to philosophy in general as it is an attack against a general philosophical presumption against Christian belief taken in the basic way. It should be clear, however, that Plantinga is not arguing that Christian belief has warrant on the basis of his theory of warrant. It is quite the opposite. As we will encounter in the next chapter Plantinga goes on to offer a specific Christian model for how Christian belief might have warrant on the account of warrant we have already discussed. Plantinga argues that *if* Christian belief has warrant, then something like his Christian model of how Christian belief might have warrant is correct.<sup>116</sup> The source of warrant is not an argument given by Plantinga; that would clearly be a circular argument.<sup>117</sup> So too, the fact that Plantinga does not build his Christian model until he has cleared the justification deck and established a new outlook on warrant, does not mean that he is arguing from a general principle to a theological one. His Christian model is not deduced from his general model any more than Plantinga's belief that Christian belief has warrant (i.e. *is true*) is deduced from his Christian model of warrant. The argument flows the other direction. Another way to put this is that Plantinga believes that if he is warranted in believing that he is correct about his general account of warrant itself, it will be because in arriving at that belief the relevant cognitive capacities were operating in a propitious environment according to a design plan—of the God made known in Jesus Christ—which is successfully aimed at truth. While Plantinga is obliged to point out that

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<sup>115</sup> This is a misinterpretation of Plantinga that befalls Richard Swinburne. He believes that the question Plantinga should be tackling is whether or not Christian belief does in fact have warrant, and he is convinced that the most sensible approach to this question is to argue from the evidence. So when Plantinga speaks of proper function and design, Swinburne seems inclined to understand Plantinga to be treating them as evidence supporting his claims. It is no wonder that Swinburne is unimpressed with the results and misses much of what Plantinga has to offer. See especially, Swinburne, "Plantinga on Warrant," 2; and, Plantinga, "Rationality and Public Evidence: a Reply to Richard Swinburne."

<sup>116</sup> *WCB*, 351.

<sup>117</sup> "If the source of the warrant of my Christian belief were this argument, then indeed the project would suffer from vicious circularity. But it isn't, and it doesn't" (*WCB*, 352).

his general model does not mandate theistic design, it is clear that *on his view*, the original warrant generating impetus for all our knowledge is a design of the Christian God.<sup>118</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have established the key features of Plantinga's solution to the problem of the illusive third criteria for knowledge, resolving the severally necessary and jointly sufficient criteria for beliefs to have warrant. Following Plantinga, we have presented his constructive case as an alternative to the particular inadequacies of traditional views of justification. In so doing we have determined that Plantinga is aligned with Barth in rejecting specific assumptions of Enlightenment modernism, and in confirming the radical epistemic dependence of the human knower.<sup>119</sup> Plantinga has, furthermore, achieved something that Barth's approach cannot do and might prefer to avoid.<sup>120</sup> As an undertaking in negative apologetics, Plantinga has undercut a host of potential defeaters for Christian belief, those which argue that acceptable Christian belief must meet some traditional version of justification with respect to public evidence or duty.<sup>121</sup> In *Warranted Christian Belief* Plantinga stakes out two projects. The first he calls "an exercise in apologetics and the philosophy of religion." Our concern thus far has been confined mostly to this first project.<sup>122</sup> In chapter 4 we will turn to Plantinga's second

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<sup>118</sup> As a bonus, Plantinga gives an argument against the major alternative to his Christian model, namely naturalistic evolution. The argument here is that if evolution were somehow responsible for our design plan there would be no reason to have any confidence that the design plan is aimed at truth rather than evolution's chief motivation the promotion of survival, adaptive behavior or reproductive fitness (*WCB*, 227–239).

<sup>119</sup> David Brown also briefly connects Barth and Plantinga in their "rejection of Enlightenment assumptions" (*Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 10).

<sup>120</sup> The question of the compatibility between Barth and Plantinga on the nature and acceptability of apologetics will be taken up in chapter 5.

<sup>121</sup> "Might I not be perfectly responsible even if I did not always require a reason for belief. . ." (*WCD*, 98). For Plantinga's own assessment of this contribution see "Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments For Christian Belief," 399; and, "Rationality and Public Evidence: a Reply to Richard Swinburne," 222.

<sup>122</sup> The broader apologetical argument that runs throughout *WCB* is that there is no viable objection to the acceptability of Christian belief that does not depend on a refutation of the *truth* of Christian belief. Plantinga challenges the notion that one may remain agnostic about the truth of Christian belief while



task, which he calls “an exercise in Christian philosophy,” offering “a good way for Christians to think about the epistemology of Christian belief.”<sup>123</sup> With respect to the knowledge of God, our chief concern, Barth has pronounced that it “derives and is to be considered only from outside all human possibilities, i.e., from the acting of God Himself.”<sup>124</sup> So far we have seen that Plantinga’s externalism suggests that the warrant for all human knowing ultimately derives “from outside.” The linchpin of Plantinga’s epistemology is the design plan, tailored to suitable environments, successfully aiming at truth. In Plantinga’s view it is this divine design, from “outside all human possibilities,” that enables the possibility of human knowing. It is now time to look at whether and in what way Plantinga sees the knowledge of God to be divinely initiated self-revelation—“from the acting of God Himself.”

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seeing that there is no acceptable way to arrive at that belief—the idea that, true or not, Christian belief is irrational, unjustified or lacks warrant. Plantinga undermines this position by showing that the only viable option for such an alethically neutral argument would be in the area of warrant. On the model Plantinga defends, however, the only way to show that Christian belief lacks warrant is to argue against the truth of the belief itself (*WCB*, viii–xiii).

<sup>123</sup> *WCB*, xiii.

<sup>124</sup> *CD* I/1, 38 (*KD* I/1, 38).

## 4

# PLANTINGA'S EPISTEMOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF: THE WARRANT OF REVELATION

The discussion of Plantinga's constructive proposal with respect to acquiring theistic and specifically Christian belief will be limited to the scope of our chief concern—that of understanding its relationship to Barth's theology of revelation. For this reason, I will present its primary components with minimal treatment of the numerous debates it has spawned and conclude with an evaluation in light of the synopsis of Barth's theological epistemology from the first two chapters. We begin with two important cautions for approaching Plantinga's theological proposal; the first applies to the proposal itself; the second regards the wider philosophical argument within which the proposal is situated. Following these comments we will briefly consider what latitude Plantinga allows philosophy in challenging Christian belief, before finally moving into a discussion of his positive theological proposal.

### ***Preliminary Cautions***

#### *Caution 1: An Intentionally Under-Specified Proposal*

What Plantinga gives us in chapters 6-9 of *Warranted Christian Belief* is a theological account of how theistic or Christian belief is formed in believers. Theologians in

particular, however, should be warned that Plantinga is nowhere attempting to present a thoroughgoing, fully nuanced theological system. In order to understand Plantinga and conduct a judicious assessment of the compatibility of his work with Barth's theology of revelation, it is important to note just what Plantinga is and is not intending to do. Far from a detailed theology of revelation, all Plantinga needs for his purposes is a rough model of how things might go—just enough to show how a theistic or Christian belief could meet his general criteria for warrant. He does give us, in fact, quite a bit more than this. To begin with, he provides not just *a* model, but two models. The first is intended to show how generally theistic belief might have warrant. This model is then extended into a second model, giving an account of how explicitly Christian belief could have warrant.<sup>1</sup> Although some have complained about the minimalist character of Plantinga's models,<sup>2</sup> Plantinga could have held himself to a far more generic account, or no model at all.<sup>3</sup> It would have been sufficient for Plantinga's core argument simply to have suggested that there may be special cognitive faculties and processes divinely designed to impart true beliefs about God and central Christian teachings. If this is so, then warrant for theistic and Christian belief may be transferred by the proper function of these special cognitive operations, in the basic way.

Plantinga, nevertheless, chooses to give a model, where these special, divinely designed, cognitive operations are named and described. He paints in broad brush the contours of an inclusive though Reformed-leaning theological proposal, noting particularly the contributions of Aquinas and Calvin. As an exercise in *Christian* philosophy, Plantinga is attempting to show that his account of how beliefs have warrant is not only philosophically defensible, but fits with the way in which the warranting operations for Christian belief proceed according to standard Christian teaching. Providing a model has the advantage of giving not merely principles, but a tangible way

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<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of Christian theology these two models represent the classical though often distorting division between general and special revelation—the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., James K. Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology: an Evaluation of Alvin Plantinga's Religious Epistemology* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 135–136.

<sup>3</sup> Plantinga reminds those who criticize his model for not defining the relationship between divine action and human freedom, that “the fewer such stands it takes the better; for the fewer such stands it takes the weaker the main premises of my argument are; and the weaker the premises are (provided they do in fact warrant the conclusion) the stronger the argument is” (“Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments For Christian Belief,” *Philosophia Christi* 3, no. 2 [2001]: 395).

to think Christianly about how Christian beliefs might legitimately be taken as knowledge; and, as one might expect, the model outlines Plantinga's own theological views on the matter. For this reason, it seems fair to include Plantinga's proposal in our theological discussion and assessment, while recognizing that it is intentionally under-specified. We should certainly not expect that Plantinga's theological proposal would be as comprehensive as Barth's. Consequently, our line of questioning will focus on the conformity of Plantinga's affirmations with Barth's main concerns and an overall evaluation of the compatibility and contribution of Plantinga's approach. Plantinga's theological proposal is intentionally under-specified because of the role it plays in his wider philosophical argument. This may have the ring of theology being pressed into the service of philosophy. Whether or not this violates a Barthian anathema, however, will depend on whether the shape of the philosophical argument grants the appropriate freedom and priority to theology. We move now to our second caution.

*Caution 2: What the Argument Is*

In what immediately follows I will only be referring to Plantinga's argument with respect to his extended model for how specifically Christian belief may have warrant. What I say, however, also applies *mutatis mutandis* to Plantinga's model for merely theistic belief. In our discussion of the place of the design plan as fundamental to warrant, we noted that it is sometimes mistakenly assumed that Plantinga is building a deductive argument that would provide persuasive reasons to conclude that Christian belief is in fact warranted. It is worth repeating here that the flow and intent of the argument is quite unlike a traditional, evidentialist apologetic.<sup>4</sup> Plantinga's chief aim is not to present a case, or provide an argument for why it is we should favor his specific theological proposal over other alternatives. As we have seen, Plantinga has done a good deal of precise philosophical work to develop a rigorous general account of warrant. He is in a position now to consider whether or not specifically Christian belief could be warranted

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<sup>4</sup> Plantinga's approach could be construed as a kind of externalist evidentialism, if the notion of evidence is allowed a wider sense than merely propositional evidence, such that memory, sense perception and faith might all be warrant transferring cognitive operations that make the truth of the matter *evident*, the deliverances of which could therefore be considered *evidence*. Evidence understood in this way refers generally to the *grounds* for one's belief. See "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," *Noûs* 15 (1981): 44–45.

on this account, and warranted in the basic way. Again the argument here is inductive in shape. Plantinga is not starting from outside belief in an attempt to show the skeptic *that* Christian belief does in fact have warrant. This would be to show how Christian belief can be accepted on the basis of a warrant transferring inference from some generally accepted starting point. Plantinga frankly admits that he knows of no such arguments the strength of which would warrant Christian belief.<sup>5</sup> “Of course this is nothing against either their truth or their warrant; very little of what we believe can be ‘demonstrated’ or ‘shown’.”<sup>6</sup> The tactic Plantinga adopts, therefore, is to give a hypothetical account of how it could be that Christian belief might arise from cognitive processes operating in the right kind of environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth. The power of the hypothetical model Plantinga chooses is that, being itself a piece of Christian theology, the premise entails the truth of Christian belief. What this achieves for Plantinga is loosely to tie premise and conclusion together, such that if—independent of the argument—Christian belief is true, then it follows that Christian belief likely does have warrant either in the way described, or in some similar way.<sup>7</sup> As suggested earlier, this is not a circular argument, because the argument itself is not trying to provide the warrant for Christian belief.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, the argument is aiming to reveal how it could be that no argument is required for Christian belief to have warrant. Plantinga’s argument is that *if* warrant for Christian belief were *in fact* transferred in the way suggested in standard Christian teaching, then the believer would be warranted to believe in the basic way and not as the conclusion of some chain of inference.

The notion of holding Christian beliefs in the basic way strikes many Christian philosophers as a rather weak position to take. They presume that Christian belief, like any belief, would have a stronger footing if it were supported by reasons in the form of a

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<sup>5</sup> WCB, 170, 201, 499. “Any argument for its warrant, therefore, would also be an argument for its truth. But I don’t know of good philosophical arguments for the claim that Christian belief is true (and I don’t know of conclusive philosophical arguments for the claim that theism is true); hence I can’t sensibly argue that Christian belief is in fact warranted. Of course my not knowing of any such arguments is wholly compatible with my knowing that both Christian and theistic belief are, in fact true, and in my better moments, I think, I do know that they are” (“Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments For Christian Belief,” 387).

<sup>6</sup> WCB, 170.

<sup>7</sup> WCB, 285.

<sup>8</sup> WCB, 351–352.

good argument.<sup>9</sup> To these detractors, Plantinga's project appears to be a trivial diversion from the more important task of providing reasons to think that Christian belief is true. Swinburne complains that the real question is whether Christian beliefs actually do have warrant. "[Plantinga] has shown that they do, if they are true; so we might hope for discussion of whether they are true."<sup>10</sup> James Beilby is similarly troubled that while Plantinga argues that Christian belief is a viable epistemic option, "he does not address the reasons to think that the Christian worldview is not only permitted but true, persuasive, compelling."<sup>11</sup> Still others regret that Plantinga's approach leaves him unable to affirm the truth of Christian belief, or the possibility of knowing that one knows that it is true.<sup>12</sup> These are important objections, all of which fail adequately to appreciate the nature of Christian belief whose warrant derives from God's revealing action. Briefly responding to these objections will help to underscore our point of caution with respect to Plantinga's argument and reinforce the compatibility here between Barth and Plantinga.

Plantinga nowhere claims that arguments or evidence cannot provide some support for Christian belief.<sup>13</sup> His chief objection is to the requirement that it *must* be supported by ulterior propositional inference in order to have warrant sufficient for knowledge.<sup>14</sup> As we have already noted, Plantinga's pronouncements against natural theology are more modest than Barth's.<sup>15</sup> But Plantinga does clearly take exception to the presumption that Christian beliefs would have a stronger footing if they were accepted on the basis of inference from propositional evidence rather than in the basic way. Unless one were

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<sup>9</sup> Deane-Peter Baker develops this criticism of Plantinga as the 'Inadequacy Thesis' (Deane-Peter Baker, "Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology: What's the Question?," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 57 [2005]: 77–103).

<sup>10</sup> Richard G. Swinburne, "Plantinga on Warrant," review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, *Religious Studies* 37 (2001): 206.

<sup>11</sup> Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology*, 141–142.

<sup>12</sup> R. Douglas Geivett and Greg Jesson, "Plantinga's Externalism and the Terminus of Warrant-Based Epistemology," *Philosophia Christi* 3, no. 2 (2001): 331. In the same volume we find Richard Fumerton's dissatisfaction with Plantinga's approach in its failing to give some "assurance of truth" ("Plantinga, Warrant, and Christian Belief," *Philosophia Christi* 3, no. 2 [2001]: 351). See note below on the 'KK-thesis.'

<sup>13</sup> "Of course they *could* be accepted on the basis of other propositions, and perhaps in some cases are" (WCB, 250).

<sup>14</sup> WCB, 93.

<sup>15</sup> We have reserved chapter 5 for an extensive discussion of this tension.

operating under coherentist assumptions,<sup>16</sup> it seems unlikely that ulterior inferential support could in every case enhance the strength of a belief. If this were so then non-basic beliefs would be stronger than the basic beliefs from which they derive their strength by inference. In fact, in the process of inference, to the degree that some probability calculus is in operation, non-basic beliefs will be weaker than the beliefs supporting them.<sup>17</sup> Plantinga argues that if Christian beliefs can be properly basic, then the “most satisfactory way to hold them will not be as the conclusions of argument.”<sup>18</sup> When warrant is transferred by a divinely designed and intended doxastic experience whereby the truth of Christian propositions becomes apparent without inference from other propositions, there is an analogy to direct perception.<sup>19</sup> The warrant for the belief is conferred by a process wherein the believer is enabled immediately to apprehend the truth of the belief. Because this kind of belief is more direct<sup>20</sup> than one that is *mediated* by inference, it is arguably a firmer and more satisfactory way to believe, in the same way that seeing for oneself is superior to depending on external testimony.<sup>21</sup> So for Plantinga, believing in the basic way is superior, though he does not deny that some basic beliefs could receive additional warrant by means of an argument from inference. Plantinga appeals to Calvin's notion that arguments might serve as secondary confirmations or aids.<sup>22</sup> Historical evidence for

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<sup>16</sup> The coherentist would not make this claim to begin with. On this view coherence itself and not inferential support is crucial to the degree of warrant a belief enjoys. See *WCD*, 79–80, where Plantinga also explains that Coherentism is, in fact, a special case of foundationalism, “the variety according to which the only source of warrant is coherence.”

<sup>17</sup> Plantinga takes this further in noting that arguments from historical evidence depend on a chain of ‘dwindling’ probabilities (*WCB*, 271–280).

<sup>18</sup> *WCB*, 210. Plantinga seems to agree with Calvin's view that, as Plantinga puts it, “the Christian ought not to believe on the basis of argument; if he does, his faith is likely to be unstable and wavering” (“The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” in *Philosophical Knowledge* [Washington, DC: American Catholic Philosophical Assoc, 1980], 53).

<sup>19</sup> Unlike perception in its phenomenal imagery, but analogically related to perception in being a direct apprehension (*WCB*, 181, 286–289).

<sup>20</sup> *WCB*, 259, 262.

<sup>21</sup> This position is strengthened further by Plantinga's treatment of the affective aspect of the gift of faith, which we have not yet discussed. Here it is not merely the truth of the proposition that is made evident, but also its loveliness, beauty, and desirability. This affective component is also more satisfactorily arrived at in the immediate, basic way, rather than on the basis of argument. See *WCB*, 304–306.

<sup>22</sup> “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” in *Christian Philosophy at the Close of the Twentieth Century: Assessment and Perspective*, eds. Sander Griffioen and Bert M. Balk (Kampen,

the resurrection, for instance, could boost the warrant one has for believing it.<sup>23</sup> But in Plantinga's view, while such arguments could play a supporting and secondary role, they would in no way be sufficient on their own to deliver the kind of warrant necessary for knowledge and 'paradigmatic' Christian belief. An argument from public evidence might show that Christian belief is somewhat more probable than not, but this "is insufficient for its being warrantably believed with *any* degree of firmness."<sup>24</sup> In summary, Plantinga's argument is that Christian belief can be properly held on grounds that are in fact firmer than the insufficient though not insignificant warrant delivered by propositional or historical evidence.

Returning now to Plantinga's detractors, Swinburne, Beilby, Geivett, Fumerton and others chide Plantinga for giving insufficient attention to the question of the truth of Christian belief. For Plantinga along with Barth, however, the truth of the matter is paramount. As Plantinga affirms, "this is *the* really important question."<sup>25</sup> Plantinga's whole program is designed to move the question of the truth of Christianity back to center stage, by undercutting the objections to the knowability of that truth. One of the leading objections to knowability is the imposed requirement that knowledge requires a supporting reason in the form of a good argument. Beneath the charge that Plantinga has skirted the question of truth is the underlying assumption that without a good argument the grounds for a belief are less than satisfactory. But this is just what Plantinga is arguing against.<sup>26</sup> And this brings us nicely back to the main point of caution. We cannot confuse 'believing without propositional evidence' with 'believing without any grounds whatsoever.' Here the notion of *a reason* can be employed misleadingly.

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Netherlands: Uitgeverij Kok, 1995), 39–40; "Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments For Christian Belief," 385; and, "Reply," *Philosophical Books* 43, no. 2 (2002): 127 n4.

<sup>23</sup> In his response to Stephen Wykstra, Plantinga writes, "So suppose I'm a beneficiary of the IIHS, but the warrant enjoyed by my belief in the resurrection doesn't come up to the standard for knowledge: learning of the historical evidence could bring it up to that standard" ("Reply," 128).

<sup>24</sup> "Rationality and Public Evidence: a Reply to Richard Swinburne," *Religious Studies* 37 (2001): 220. See also *WCB*, 271, 274, 280, 379.

<sup>25</sup> *WCB*, 499 (italics mine).

<sup>26</sup> This central point is somehow missed for those like Thomas McHugh Reed who fail to grasp one of Plantinga's most fundamental assertions—that there may be non-propositional grounds for belief. See Thomas McHugh Reed, "Christianity and Agnosticism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 52 (2002). See also, John Zeis, "A Critique of Plantinga's Theological Foundationalism," *Philosophy of Religion* 28 (1990).



If we take an R1-reason to mean a propositional argument, then it is correct to say that Plantinga is arguing that we can know that Christian belief is true without an R1-reason. But taken in this sense, as Plantinga notes in his response to Fumerton, God's own beliefs are not based on R1-reasons.<sup>27</sup> Instead God's knowledge is grounded in his very nature, which leads us to the other sense in which *a reason* may be taken, R2-reason: the grounding or warranting connection between our beliefs and the truth of the matter. Taken in this way, it is not at all the case that believers are without *a reason* for believing as they do. The R2-reason for belief, according to Plantinga's theological proposal, is grounded in cognitive operations designed by God to deliver true belief. When operating without impedance, this R2-reason is far better than the R1-reason any argument could supply.<sup>28</sup> The implication is, of course, that the demonstration of the truth of Christian belief is something we *receive* and not something we could supply ourselves. It is not that Plantinga does not himself know that Christian belief is true, or even know that he knows.<sup>29</sup> It is rather that Plantinga believes that the grounds for his knowledge of the truth

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<sup>27</sup> "Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments For Christian Belief," 390.

<sup>28</sup> In Paul Helm's discussion of Plantinga's deployment of Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, he seems to miss the significance of this distinction between R1 and R2 reasons—which in his discussion features as the distinction between *grounds* and *evidence*. Neither Plantinga nor Calvin suggest that belief may be *reasonless*. Furthermore, Plantinga's appeal to Calvin is not to prove the factual existence of a divinely designed faculty as Helm worries, but to indicate precedence in the Christian theological tradition for the possibility of noetic equipment designed to yield properly basic belief in God. The fact that Calvin does not theorize about *rationality* does not prevent Plantinga from drawing the epistemological implications out of an ontological claim. See Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 188–189, 197–201.

<sup>29</sup> Plantinga need not accept the suggestion made by Geivett and Jesson (330–331) that his externalism limits him from being able to know that he knows that Christian belief is true. Notice how a typically evidentialist conception of knowing is smuggled into this charge. The question seems reasonable: 'how do you know that you know that what you believe is true?' But what kind of answer do we think we need? Why should an R1-reason be required for knowledge about knowledge. Clearly if first-order knowledge can be warranted for the externalist in the basic way then so *could* all other reflection on the status of that knowledge. The externalist can know *that* without knowing *how* and without having an R1-reason. This applies equally as well to knowing that one knows in Hintikka's famous 'KK-thesis.' See Jaakko Hintikka, *Knowledge and Belief: An Introduction to the Logic of the Two Notions*, Contemporary Philosophy (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962), 28; and, Risto Hilpinen, "Knowing that One Knows and the Classical Definition of Knowledge," *Synthese* 21, no. 2 (1970): 109–132. Plantinga does in fact provide a way in which one might have an R1-reason for thinking that a warrant-basic belief has warrant (WCB, 347–348). The premise from which the inference flows is itself taken in the basic way

of Christian belief are, to use his phrase, “beyond the competence of philosophy.”<sup>30</sup> He claims that (at least in his ‘better moments’<sup>31</sup>) he knows the truth of Christian belief in the basic way, and he claims to show *how* his beliefs could have sufficient warrant for knowledge. What he does not claim to show is *that* his beliefs are true.<sup>32</sup> And so it is in fact in deference to the importance of the truth of the matter that Plantinga holds that a sufficient human demonstration of its truth is not possible. Using the resources of the historic Christian tradition to support his theological proposal, Plantinga’s argument shows that the answer to the key question about the truth of Christian belief, vainly sought in the weak demonstrations of human argument, is properly received from God above—exactly as Barth would have it.

Our cautions amount to a reminder that the warrant for Plantinga’s model and Plantinga’s wider argument ultimately derives from the action of God himself. This recognition yields another significant intersection between Barth and Plantinga. In the second chapter we noted that while Barth concedes a priority to the epistemic question, in seeking its answer he remains committed to the fundamental ontological priority of the object of theological knowing. Plantinga draws the same conclusion. As we have seen, his argument has value, whether or not one is prepared to accept the truth of the premises. The *possibility* that Christian belief could have warrant in the way described undercuts the *de jure* objection. The stronger conclusion, that Christian belief does indeed have warrant, depends on whether or not one is willing to accept the truth of the premises. Since warrant for the premise is transferred in the basic way and not by argument, it is the case, as Plantinga says, that “the dispute as to whether theistic belief is rational

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and provides by inference the R1-reason for the belief that one knows that one knows. Furthermore, this is exactly how Plantinga himself is arguing. Nevertheless, since the premise of the argument—which is the theological model—is taken in the basic way, the whole argument rests on whether or not the premise is the divinely given truth of the matter. Truth, which only God can demonstrate, is back at center stage. Similarly Barth notes that dogmatics “realises that all its knowledge, even its knowledge of the correctness of its knowledge, can only be an event, and cannot therefore be guaranteed as correct knowledge from any place apart from or above this event” (CD I/1, 42; KD I/1, 42).

<sup>30</sup> WCB, 499.

<sup>31</sup> “Of course my not knowing of any such arguments is wholly compatible with my knowing that both Christian and theistic belief are, in fact true, and in my better moments, I think, I do know that they are” (“Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments For Christian Belief,” 387).

<sup>32</sup> WCB, 169.

(warranted) can't be settled just by attending to epistemological considerations."<sup>33</sup> And so he concludes that, "it is at bottom not merely an epistemological dispute, but an ontological or theological dispute." One's theological, metaphysical commitments will determine what one will accept to be legitimate warrant conferring conditions. The priority of ontology is what motivates Plantinga's argument and supports the conclusion that any successful objection to Christian belief must be aimed at the truth of the belief and not the epistemic inadequacy of its formation.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Plantinga's A/C Model of Theistic Belief***

Plantinga's theological proposal comes, as I have said, in two parts. The first part is a model, the Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model, intended to explain how belief in God, broadly conceived, might have warrant. The second part is said to be an extension of this first model, the extended A/C model, describing how explicitly Christian belief could be warranted. As the name implies, the extended A/C model bears a relation to the A/C model, though it is clearly a different model altogether. It is correct to view Plantinga's proposal not as one model with two parts, but two discrete models the second having an impact on the first. We will treat the A/C model and the extended A/C model separately, bearing in mind that all Plantinga hopes to achieve is an account that grows out of Christian teaching itself which would explain the possibility that a given basic belief is the result of truth-oriented, environmentally-suited, belief-producing operations<sup>35</sup> working according to plan.

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<sup>33</sup> WCB, 190. "So if we trace the epistemological question back we find (with apologies to John Austin) an ontological question grinning residually up at us from the bottom of the mug" ("The Prospects for Natural Theology," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 [1991]: 309).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. WCB, 191. See also William Alston's discussion of the relationship between metaphysics and epistemology in Plantinga's model ("Epistemology and Metaphysics," in *Knowledge and Reality: Essays in Honor of Alvin Plantinga*, eds. Thomas Crisp, Matthew Davidson and David Vander Laan [Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2006], 81–87).

<sup>35</sup> The word 'operations' is chosen here to be more general than Plantinga's terms 'faculty' and 'process' which are associated each with the A/C and extended A/C model respectively.

*The A/C Model: Overview*

The key feature of Plantinga's A/C model is what Aquinas refers to as a general though confused knowledge of God "implanted in us by nature,"<sup>36</sup> and what Calvin calls a "sense of divinity" (*sensus divinitatis*) which is "engraved upon men's minds."<sup>37</sup> Neither Aquinas nor Calvin gives a detailed epistemological account of how this implanted knowledge arises in the human knower. It is as Calvin says, "naturally inborn in all." Plantinga seems a bit unsatisfied with this notion of immediate implantation.<sup>38</sup> Instead he originally refers to the *sensus divinitatis* as a "strong tendency or inclination toward belief"<sup>39</sup> and, in his exposition of the A/C model, as a "kind of faculty or a cognitive mechanism . . . which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God."<sup>40</sup> Rather than interpreting *sensus divinitatis* merely to be a generally "numinous awareness of God"<sup>41</sup> implanted as a *seed of religion*, Plantinga conceives of a faculty that is similar to our senses, in that it operates under certain triggering conditions. These conditions might range widely from an encounter with the wonders of creation to an experience of guilt or spontaneous thanksgiving.<sup>42</sup> Unlike a faculty of empirical sensation, Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis* does not give us a perception of God.<sup>43</sup> The triggering experience is only the occasion for the formation of true beliefs about God, beliefs that of course entail God's existence. Another way to put this is that, while "the operation of the *sensus divinitatis* will always involve the presence of experience of some kind,"<sup>44</sup> the dictates of our *external rationality* with respect to the *sensus divinitatis* does not regard the proper formation of phenomenal experience but only the proper formation

<sup>36</sup> For Aquinas, by this implanted knowledge we know of God's existence without being clear on exactly who God is (*Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [New York: Benziger Bros., 1947], I. ii. 1).

<sup>37</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (London: S.C.M. Press, 1961), I. iii. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Immediate knowledge does not mean an unmediated experience of God, but may refer to an implanted knowing that is not dependent on triggering conditions. What Plantinga has in mind does involve triggering conditions.

<sup>39</sup> *RBG*, 66.

<sup>40</sup> *WCB*, 172.

<sup>41</sup> From the translator's note on "*divinitatis sensum*," *Institutes*, I. iii. 3. footnote 189.

<sup>42</sup> *WCB*, 174.

<sup>43</sup> *WCB*, 180–84

<sup>44</sup> *WCB*, 183.

of doxastic experience occasioned by it. What is delivered by the *sensus divinitatis*, triggered as it is by various experiences, is not a perception of God but of some truth about God.

Plantinga claims that the *sensus divinitatis* in his A/C model does the work that he needs done. It details a cognitive faculty that is part of God's design for human beings that, when functioning properly under certain conditions, produces warranted belief in the existence of God.<sup>45</sup> Plantinga concedes, as do Calvin and Aquinas, that there is one major problem with the *sensus divinitatis*, namely, that the human fall into sin has rendered this way of knowing largely if not completely inoperative.<sup>46</sup> Hopes for restoring this cognitive faculty to proper function are dependent on work done in the extended A/C model by the Holy Spirit. Given the possibility that the noetic effects of sin may be sufficiently overcome to allow the adequate function of the *sensus divinitatis*, the A/C model is successful in explaining how it is that a general belief in God might be warranted. There remains, however, a number of important questions to ask about the A/C model. We will begin with a look at Plantinga's requirement for triggering conditions, then turn to reservations about the success of the A/C model, and finally note the tensions in the A/C model with Barth's theology of revelation.

### *The A/C Model: Acquired not Implanted Knowledge*

Why is it that Plantinga seems to show an aversion to the notion of a merely implanted or inborn knowledge of God, preferring instead a faculty operating on the occasion of certain experiences? He appears to combine affirmations that in Aquinas and Calvin are kept separate.<sup>47</sup> Aquinas reasons that our being led to desire a happiness that can only be

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<sup>45</sup> WCB, 179, 186.

<sup>46</sup> WCB, 184–186.

<sup>47</sup> Plantinga has been roundly criticized for misinterpreting Calvin on exactly this point; thus, Moreland and Craig charge that Plantinga “seriously misrepresents Calvin on this score” (James P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003], 168). Michael Sudduth's critiques Plantinga for failing to observe a distinction between the *implanted* knowledge Calvin speaks of in Chapter 3 of book I of the *Institutes*, from the *acquired* knowledge of God in Chapter 5 (Michael L. Czapkay Sudduth, “Plantinga's Revision of the Reformed Tradition: Rethinking our Natural Knowledge of God,” *Philosophical Books* 42, no. 2 [2002]: 83–84).

fulfilled in God implies an implanted form of the knowledge of God.<sup>48</sup> This implanted knowledge is different from the general knowledge of God that is acquired as a function of natural reason in consideration of the ways in which God is evidenced by his effects.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, for Calvin, there is a distinction between a knowledge of God which is a “deposit in our minds,” and the manifestation of “his perfections in the whole structure of the universe.”<sup>50</sup> Plantinga’s move to combine these two elements into one capacity, while possibly obscuring Calvin’s distinction,<sup>51</sup> helps to avoid a potential misinterpretation of Calvin on general revelation. Calvin nowhere suggests that unaided human reason by inference from the data of experience can demonstrate the truth of propositions about God. If the capacity of the *sensus divinitatis* is not operative in beholding the manifestations of God in creation, it would tend to promote the conclusion that the warrant for such beliefs as are triggered by experience comes by way of inference rather than the operation of a divine gift. This would not only misrepresent Calvin (and Aquinas) but it would be entirely unhelpful to Plantinga’s contention that arguments for God’s existence are not strong enough alone to support full-fledged Christian belief.<sup>52</sup> The price of placing Calvin’s two notions under one heading appears to be the loss of a *sensus divinitatis* that might operate without triggering conditions. As already noted, Michael Sudduth challenges Plantinga on just this point with the suggestion that Plantinga ignores Calvin’s notion of *implanted knowledge*, replacing it with an *innate capacity*. But is an implanted knowledge wholly without conditions really possible?

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<sup>48</sup> “To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man’s beatitude. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by man must be naturally known to him” (*Summa Theologica*, I. ii. 1). See also *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I. v. 1.

<sup>49</sup> “The existence of God, in so far as it is not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated from those of His effects which are known to us” (*Summa Theologica*, I. ii. 2). It is this non-implanted knowledge which is in view in the passage Plantinga cites (*WCB*, 170n3., 176–177), *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III. xxxviii.

<sup>50</sup> *Institutes*, I. v. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Plantinga’s chief aim is not Calvin exegesis; “whatever Calvin thinks, however, it’s our model” (*WCB*, 173). Nevertheless, Plantinga defends his interpretation against Sudduth’s critique: “I’m no Calvin scholar, but I doubt that he intended a distinction between the knowledge of God as proposed in Chapter 3 and that affirmed in Chapter 5” (“Reply,” 134).

<sup>52</sup> Plantinga is willing to countenance variations on his model that might involve a ‘quick inference’ or a further boost in warrant from argument; but, in each case, inference alone is not sufficient (*WCB*, 176; “Reply,” 128).

Consider how the notion of implanted knowledge might fit into Plantinga's own highly nuanced, general account of knowledge. In Plantinga's view, knowledge and belief are inextricably linked. It is impossible that one could know something without believing it. Aquinas and Calvin employ the term *knowledge* without honed epistemological constraints, such that an innate *knowledge* can be present without belief.<sup>53</sup> This is not a knowledge such as the demons may have which involves assent but fails to have the appropriate affective response. It is a *knowledge* that coincides with an utter lack of cognitive assent, a lack of assent that is described as a denial or suppression of what is *known*.<sup>54</sup> Implanted *knowledge* of this kind is not implanted belief. What Calvin seems to have in mind at points would not be called *knowledge* in Plantinga's system, but rather something more like access to, or an intuitive grasp of, the truthfulness of some propositions about God. In other words, a given capacity. As Calvin describes it, even those in unbelief, "occasionally feel the truth which they are desirous not to know." Furthermore, as Plantinga points out, it is "a bit far-fetched" to suggest that this capacity is producing belief from the moment of birth.<sup>55</sup> If what we are really talking about is an implanted capacity to grasp the truthfulness of some propositions about God, then environmental conditions do apply after all. Beliefs would not issue at some arbitrary stage, but arise as one begins to grasp the meaning of the propositions whose truthfulness the *sensus divinitatis* enables one to "feel." In order to grasp the meaning of propositions about God, it could be argued, requires having experiences, maybe even the kinds of experiences which in Plantinga's model operate as triggers for belief.<sup>56</sup> So while

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<sup>53</sup> "In the present day not a few are found who deny the being of a God, yet, whether they will or not, they occasionally feel the truth which they are desirous not to know" (*Institutes*, I. iii. 2).

<sup>54</sup> On either view it is agreed that, the failure of the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis* to result in belief is due to a disruption in proper function caused by sin, impairing the formation of the right doxastic experience and disrupting the correct formation of belief on the basis of it. Plantinga discusses these two impairments as the damage done to the *sensus divinitatis* on the one hand, and a resistance to its deliverances on the other (*WCB*, 205).

<sup>55</sup> "Reply," 134. Also see *WCB*, 173.

<sup>56</sup> If this is correct then the beliefs formed by Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* would be more like the deliverances of reason, *a priori* beliefs which are formed "independently of experience" (*WPF*, 103). In an early exchange with Peter Losin, Plantinga withholds from the suggestion that belief in God's existence might be on the basis of seeing the truth of the proposition as with *a priori* beliefs. Instead he offers the knowledge we have by way of memory as a more favorable analogue ("Reformed Epistemology Again," *The Reformed Journal* 32 [1982]: 8). In *WCB*, 173, however, Plantinga makes the

Plantinga's A/C model may somewhat obscure a distinction in Calvin, there is no impact to the thrust of Calvin on general revelation, affirming an indispensable, though merely indirect role for experience in the operation of a divinely designed, innate capacity.<sup>57</sup> This leaves open, of course, the question of the extent of the damage done by sin which we will touch on next.

*The A/C Model: Is It Successful?*

We now turn to the question of whether the A/C model is sufficient for the purposes of Plantinga's wider argument. The most apparent weakness of the A/C model is one that is only exposed by the *extended* A/C model, for specifically Christian belief, where the noetic effects of sin are detailed. Sin has "damaged and deformed" the *sensus divinitatis* and twisted us to resist its deliverances.<sup>58</sup> Some Calvin scholars suggest that Calvin saw no role for the *sensus divinitatis* in a postlapsarian knowledge of God.<sup>59</sup> Plantinga does not see it this way. For Plantinga it is merely that because of sin and its noetic effects, the A/C model is "incomplete."<sup>60</sup> In order for the *sensus divinitatis* to yield some true belief about God first requires healing from this damage, which is a work of the Holy Spirit. Because of sin the A/C model cannot stand alone, but is dependent on components of the

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analogy to our capacity for arithmetical knowledge. In the *Reply* to Sudduth, Plantinga calls attention to the resemblance the question bears to the debate between Locke and Leibniz over innate ideas; and, registers a preference for an interpretation of Leibniz where knowledge emerges in response to experience. What appears to be least appealing to Plantinga about implantation is the lack of explanation for the emergence of beliefs from it. This, I believe, is addressed if we understand Calvin's Chapter 3 *sensus divinitatis* to refer to a capacity to grasp the truth of some propositions about God, which requires cognitive development to the point of understanding the meaning of those propositions.

<sup>57</sup> At least on this point, Sudduth's charge that Plantinga has revised the Reformed position on the natural knowledge of God fails to convince. We will encounter the reformed position again vis-à-vis natural theology in the following chapter.

<sup>58</sup> WCB, 205.

<sup>59</sup> These scholars suggest that the impact of the noetic effects of sin on the *sensus divinitatis* is total (John Beversluis, "Reforming the "Reformed" Objection to Natural theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 12, no. 2 [1995]: 193–194; and, Derek S. Jeffreys, "How Reformed is Reformed Epistemology? Alvin Plantinga and Calvin's 'Sensus Divinitatis'," *Religious Studies* 33 [1997]: 428–430).

<sup>60</sup> WCB, 186.



extended A/C model to function.<sup>61</sup> This is, however, not the most common objection to the success of the A/C model. The most common objection is that the A/C model fails to yield precisely what it must yield to serve Plantinga's argument: properly basic belief.

This objection comes in many varieties, all of which suggest that on the A/C model beliefs about God may still involve some kind of evidential support, and are therefore, by definition, not basic. This objection, in most cases, is meant to apply to the extended A/C model as well. The most common formulations are as follows. First, some worry that unlike those beliefs arising directly from the proposed analogues—memory, sense perception and *a priori* intuition—beliefs arising from the *sensus divinitatis* are indirect, being grounded in some kind of perceptual or doxastic experience.<sup>62</sup> This objection does not suggest that an inference is involved, but points to a dependence which is allegedly unfitting for a basic belief.<sup>63</sup> Plantinga, however, has made it clear that he is not arguing for a notion of basicity that requires properly basic beliefs to be without ground,<sup>64</sup> it is rather that they are not grounded by evidence or inference from other beliefs. This objection, therefore, is no threat to the notion of basicity that Plantinga wishes to defend.

Second, it is noted that Plantinga is open to a variant of the A/C model that involves a 'quick inference,' where what is actually basic is assent to a premise in an argument the

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<sup>61</sup> John Beversluis argues that, for Calvin, salvation does not involve a repairing of the *sensus divinitatis*. Knowledge of God is by faith alone.

<sup>62</sup> Versions of this can be found in: Robert Audi, "Direct Justification, Evidential Dependence, and Theistic Belief," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, eds. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Paul Helm, review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, *Mind* 110, no. 440 (2001): 1113; and, Philip Quinn, "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga," in *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 28–29.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Grigg advances a related objection also targeting analogies to more mundane basic beliefs, but suggests that these beliefs actually rest on evidentially supported beliefs in the credibility of the faculties delivering them. What Grigg does not seem to see is that beliefs generated by these faculties are not derived by inference from a belief in the credibility of the faculty. The belief in the credibility of the faculty enables the unobstructed flow of warrant in the same way a defeater-defeater might operate (see below). See Richard Grigg, "The Crucial Disanalogies Between Properly Basic Belief and Belief in God," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990).

<sup>64</sup> *RBG*, 78–82; "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," 44–48.

conclusion of which is a theistic belief.<sup>65</sup> On this variation, phenomenal experience would not be the occasion for theistic belief but rather the occasion for seeing the truth of a crucial premise in a quick argument to a theistic belief.<sup>66</sup> This openness is not a threat to the success of the model because, on the one hand it is not required and is resisted by Plantinga,<sup>67</sup> and on the other hand, even if it is granted that the theistic belief is itself technically inferred, it remains the case that the real work of the argument is done not by human reason but by the gift of the deliverances of the A/C model.

Third, some hold that Plantinga gives space for natural theology to play an essential role in supporting some theistic belief. Although the arguments of natural theology would never be sufficient on their own, it is imagined that, in cases where revelation by means of the *sensus divinitatis* is somewhat muted, these arguments might provide the additional warrant needed to boost warrant to the level required for knowledge.<sup>68</sup> We have reserved the next chapter to look at tensions between Barth and Plantinga on natural theology. It is sufficient here to say that, while Plantinga does indeed seem open to this possibility, the objection fails as natural theology is categorically excluded from the A/C model.

Fourth, it has been argued that Plantinga's *no-defeater condition* leaves belief in need of support from arguments thereby undermining its basicity. We will look at defeaters in more detail at the end of this chapter. For the purpose of understanding this objection it is enough to see that Plantinga grants that warrant can be disrupted if one finds oneself convinced by an argument that refutes or entails the refutation of the belief in question. In these situations warrant can only again flow unobstructed if the defeating argument is itself defeated to the satisfaction of the knower by a defeater-defeater. Since it is the case that most sophisticated adults do have defeaters, Some argue that the A/C model depends

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<sup>65</sup> The example Plantinga gives is the premise, "*the heavens can be gloriously beautiful only if God has created them*" (WCB, 176; see also 304).

<sup>66</sup> See Laura L. Garcia, "Natural Theology and the Reformed Objection," 118–120; and, Keith Mascord, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics*, 130–135.

<sup>67</sup> "On that model, it is not that one notes the experiences, whatever exactly they are, connected with the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*, and then makes a quick inference to the existence of God" (WCB, 330).

<sup>68</sup> Quinn, "The Foundations of Theism Again," 35–45; Sudduth, "Plantinga's Revision of the Reformed Tradition," 89; and, Stephen J. Wykstra, "'Not Done in a Corner': How To Be a Sensible Evidentialist About Jesus," *Philosophical Books* 42, no. 2 (2002): 106. Plantinga's response grants this possibility ("Reply," 127–128).

on the support of defeater-defeaters to warrant theistic belief.<sup>69</sup> As Beilby puts it, “the presence of defeaters for Christian belief often causes Christians to seek to *support* their religious beliefs by developing defeater-defeaters.”<sup>70</sup> If belief requires the support of arguments it is no longer strictly basic. Hoitenga asks, “If the proper basicity of theistic belief makes the arguments of natural theology unnecessary and inappropriate to its justification, why does that proper basicity not make apologetic defenses of that belief equally unnecessary and inappropriate to its justification?”<sup>71</sup> The problem with this objection is that even in cases where a defeater-defeater is operative, the defeater-defeater is not *supporting* or supplying warrant for belief in God.<sup>72</sup> The defeater-defeater is rebutting or undercutting another belief that is obstructing the flow of warrant. Far from being a challenge to the proper basicity of belief, the defeater-defeater allows belief to form in the properly basic way. Plantinga clearly allows that in some cases a defeater-defeater is needed to safeguard epistemically responsible belief. But in these instances the belief in no way derives by inference from the defeater-defeater—it is not in some way *based on* an argument.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> “Religious belief that systematically requires the neutralization of defeaters largely or even completely loses its basicity” (Christoph Jäger, “Warrant, Defeaters, and the Epistemic Basis of Religious Belief,” in *Scientific Explanation and Religious Belief*, eds. Michael Parker and Thomas Schmidt [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005], 97). “The defeater-defeater requirement suggests that the rationality of theistic belief, even construed in an externalist manner, sometimes demands a degree of internalist reflective rationality whereby we acquire reasons for supposing that theistic belief has some epistemic excellence” (Michael L. Czapkay Sudduth, “The Internalist Character and Evidentialist Implications of Plantingian Defeaters,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 45 [1999]: 182–183).

<sup>70</sup> Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology*, 197 (emphasis mine).

<sup>71</sup> Dewey J. Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: an Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991), 209.

<sup>72</sup> Though disagreeing, Beilby recognizes that for Plantinga, “theistic belief is not based (epistemically) on the defeater-defeater. Rather, the belief continues to be grounded by the experience which occasioned the belief” (*Epistemology as Theology*, 58).

<sup>73</sup> Plantinga has always been clear that negative apologetics does not provide a *basis* for belief. For instance, when employing the *free-will defense* to defeat Democritus’ objection to belief in God, Plantinga remarks, “Of course if this happens, my original belief may still be basic; I do not now accept it *on the basis of* my belief that Democritus’ argument is unsuccessful” (*RGB*, 84). Plantinga later distinguishes proper basicity with respect to justification from proper basicity with respect to warrant. In the case where a defeater-defeater is required for epistemically responsible belief, it is still *proper* with respect to one’s epistemic responsibilities (justification) that the belief be held without its being *based on* another belief. Likewise, and more clearly with warrant, the need for a defeater-defeater in no

*The A/C Model: Tensions with Barth's Theology of Revelation*

While the A/C model raises some serious questions for compatibility with Barth there is nothing new here that we have not flagged earlier. We have again encountered the apparent disagreement over natural theology, which will occupy our attention in the next chapter. Other questions arise primarily around Barth's emphatic insistence that knowledge of God is a human possibility only by the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In contrast, it may seem that there is nothing particularly Christian about Plantinga's A/C model—that it is proposing a knowledge of God outside of the work of the Spirit ministering Christ. On Barth's account there is no avenue to the knowledge of God that begins with generic theism or originates from an innate human capacity. As we will see, however, in our treatment of the *extended A/C model*, due to the noetic effects of sin,<sup>74</sup> it is only by the gracious redemptive work of the Spirit that there is any hope for the gradual repair of the *sensus divinitatis*. Moreover, in Plantinga's view, because of the damage done by sin, "These beliefs do not come to the Christian just by way of . . . the *sensus divinitatis*, or any other of the cognitive faculties with which we human beings were originally created; they come *instead* by way of the work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>75</sup> Plantinga agrees that *post lapsus* Christian belief does not and could not originate from an innate human capacity. Furthermore, there is no room in Plantinga's model at any point for a knowledge of God that arises from innate ideas remembered.<sup>76</sup>

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way impacts the fact that belief may be properly (warrantedly) taken in the basic way. See *WCB*, 177–178.

<sup>74</sup> Derek Jeffereys charges that Plantinga, "obscures Calvin's insightful analysis of the noetic effect of sin," and therefore "ignores Calvin's harsh negative assessment of the *sensus divinitatis*." In *WCB* Plantinga has clarified his position helpfully so that it is clear that the only adequate knowledge of God delivered by the postlapsarian *sensus divinitatis* is due to its regeneration by the Spirit as part of the gift of faith. "Our original knowledge of God and his glory is muffled and impaired; it has been replaced by stupidity, dullness, blindness, inability to perceive God or to perceive him in his handiwork" (*WCB*, 214–215).

<sup>75</sup> *WCB*, 245 (emphasis added).

<sup>76</sup> It is assumed by some in dialogue with *RBG* that, "Plantinga's epistemology is innatist in the tradition of Augustinian Platonism" (J. Wesley Robbins, "Belief in God, Proper Basicity, and Rationality," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 2 [1993]: 339–340), and that Plantinga embraces a Platonic doctrine of innate ideas rather than a Thomistic or Aristotelian notion of an innate capacity (Thomas A. Russman, "'Reformed' Epistemology," in *Thomistic Papers*, vol. iv, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy [Houston, Texas: The Center for Thomistic Studies, 1988], 195–200). Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis*, however, is

As for the concern about building from a generic theism, we have already discussed Plantinga's rejection of the *general starting-point assumption* and cautioned about misunderstanding the flow of his argument. The A/C model is not a premise in an argument for theistic belief. And since, due to sin, the A/C model is dependent on and largely replaced by the extended A/C model, it is in fact the case that defending any role for the *sensus divinitatis* is unnecessary to Plantinga's wider argument. If Plantinga is right, there cannot be a warranted theistic belief that is not the work of the Spirit's giving birth to faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>77</sup> It is to this extended A/C model that we now turn.

### ***Plantinga's Extended A/C Model of Christian Belief***

#### *The Extended A/C Model: Overview*

The focus of Plantinga's model for warranted *Christian* belief is a "three-tiered cognitive process."<sup>78</sup> The three elements in the process are Christian scripture, the Holy Spirit and faith. Christian scripture is a collection of human texts with human authors which God has specially chosen and inspired to use as a means for his own communication. This action of God unifies the human texts into a grand narrative with a central theme, "the gospel, the stunning good news of the way of salvation God has graciously offered."<sup>79</sup> The second and driving element of the process is the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IIHS). Whereas the A/C model treated a human cognitive faculty that is part of our "natural epistemic equipment,"<sup>80</sup> the *extended* A/C model involves a supernatural work of the Spirit. According to the model, the context of the IIHS is the reading or hearing of the message of Scripture. The IIHS enables a kind of perception whereby a person comes to grasp the truth of that primary gospel narrative. In other words, the experience of the work of the IIHS is a *doxastic experience*

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not a maieutic faculty. The knowledge of God is not something that by nature resides unborn in human beings. See also Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga*, xii, 238–240.

<sup>77</sup> This is not to say that other theistic religions could not leverage some of Plantinga's work in the creation of their own models for how their beliefs might have warrant (WCB, 350). But it does mean that according to Plantinga the model for human knowledge of God is irreducibly Christian. We will return to this in greater detail in chapter 6.

<sup>78</sup> WCB, 243–244

<sup>79</sup> WCB, 243.

<sup>80</sup> WCB, 256.

recommending to us belief in the truth of the “main lines of the Christian gospel.”<sup>81</sup> The IIHS makes the truth *evident*, not on the basis of propositional evidence, but with the immediacy that characterizes self-evident truths or the deliverances of our memory.<sup>82</sup> The evidentiality of the truth made known does not have the kind of phenomenology attending sense experience, but is nevertheless rightly considered a real *perceiving*. The belief to which the IIHS gives birth is the third element of the process, faith. We have already mentioned that Plantinga appeals to Calvin’s definition of faith, recognizing its essential cognitive content. The gift of faith is a gift of knowledge—that is, a gift of warranted true belief. Plantinga also treats faith’s vital affective component as well, and even notes the affective parallels to warrant.<sup>83</sup> And, because faith is the end product of this special Spirit-driven three-tiered cognitive process, Plantinga typically refers to the whole process as the *cognitive process of faith*.

As a cognitive process, in most respects, the cognitive process of faith is like our other natural cognitive faculties; it is a cognitive endowment designed by God to yield true belief, subject to similar functional and environmental conditions. If one is fully proper functional with respect to external rationality, then the doxastic experience delivered by the IIHS will be a strong and clear perceiving endorsement of the truth of the gospel. If one is fully internally rational and operating in an appropriate environment, then the full degree of warrant being transferred by the testimony of the Holy Spirit will be reflected in the strength of the belief produced, and overall coherence with one’s wider set of beliefs will be pursued.<sup>84</sup> What is unique about the cognitive process of faith is that the beliefs it produces are the direct result of a *donum supernaturalis*; but, this is no slight difference. For while the supernatural character of the input to this process does not change the humanness of the knowing produced nor alter the essential criteria for warranted belief, the fact that the cognitive process of faith involves a direct encounter with God the Spirit

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<sup>81</sup> WCB, 248.

<sup>82</sup> WCB, 262, 265.

<sup>83</sup> See WCB, 309–311. This renders curious the denouncement of Harriet Harris that, “Plantinga confines his attention to faith as a cognitive activity and does not expand his notion of cognitive activity in a way that recognizes the constitutive roles of affections or the intelligence of emotions” (Harriet A. Harris, “Does Analytical Philosophy Clip our Wings? Reformed Theology as a Test Case,” in *Faith and Philosophical Analysis: The Impact of Analytical Philosophy on the Philosophy of Religion* [Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005], 115).

<sup>84</sup> Plantinga details how the cognitive process of faith meets the four essential criteria in his warrant formula, in other words, the four essential criteria for knowledge. See WCB, 246, 256–257.

means that this cognitive process entails the very remedies needed to ensure warranted believing. The part of Plantinga's Christian model that we have already treated in some detail is its recognition of devastating noetic effects of sin. Wrapped up with the gift of faith is a transformational work of the Spirit whereby, "the ravages of sin (including the cognitive damage) are repaired, gradually or suddenly, to a greater or lesser extent."<sup>85</sup> Here the question of proper function cuts both ways. The cognitive impact of sin has a distorting and attenuating effect on the doxastic experiences of faith, while at the same time the very presence of the Spirit drawing us to Christ begins to rehabilitate and restore proper function.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, until a human knower is completely renewed there will be varying interference in the deliverances of faith which will reduce warrant and weaken belief.<sup>87</sup> In keeping with Plantinga's general account of warrant we find that the deliverances of faith are also open to the possibility of defeat; and, good doxastic practice will require, for some, investigating arguments against belief as part of remaining internally rational.

Many of the same questions raised for Plantinga's A/C model may also be raised for his extended model. Is it successful as an account of *Christian* belief taken in the basic way which fulfills Plantinga's general account of warrant? What issues does the extended model raise for the question of Plantinga's congruity with Barth? In some cases of parallel concern nothing new needs to be said than has already been said; but, in other cases new issues are raised that require clarification. We will confine ourselves to what seem to be the three issues of greatest concern and treat them in conversation with Barth.

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<sup>85</sup> WCB, 244.

<sup>86</sup> Why the restoring work of the Spirit is evidenced in some and resisted in others is not a question Plantinga seeks to resolve with his model.

<sup>87</sup> Surprisingly, Plantinga has been criticized for giving an 'ideal' account of faith, and, in so doing, failing to "describe the actual epistemic situation of typical believers" (Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology*, 139). But, Plantinga is fully aware that typical cases of faith remain troubled by doubt to some degree (WCB, 260 n35, 264 n43). Does this undermine the model as an account of how typical Christian belief can have warrant? The fact is that for many Christian's faith fluctuates and with it so does the degree of warrant for Christian belief, exactly as Plantinga's model describes. We will meet this objection again in our discussion of whether defeater-defeaters or natural theology might preserve or boost warrant. For similar complaints see Keith A. Mascord, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 199; and, Andrew Chignell, "Epistemology for Saints," *Books & Culture* 8, no. 2 (2002).

*The Extended A/C Model: Authentic Human Christian Belief*

At one point in Plantinga's explanation the cognitive process of faith he describes the Holy Spirit as one "who gets us to accept, causes us to believe, the great truths of the gospel."<sup>88</sup> *Facilitating acceptance* and *causing belief*, however, seem to be two rather different notions; and, possibly Plantinga is offering them as just this, two alternative conceptions both of which are compatible with the model. Though some have raised the concern that Plantinga's model may be endangered by this tension. Paul Helm suggests that if there is a role for human acceptance or rejection of the gift of faith, that such a "metaphysically independent act of the will" would "threaten the proper basicity of faith."<sup>89</sup> Moreland and Craig worry that if beliefs are formed in the believer by someone other than the believer, that this may not be a case of authentic human believing.<sup>90</sup> If we combine Helm's concern with Moreland and Craig's the question becomes: is Plantinga's model an account of authentic human Christian belief, and if so, does this compromise its warrant basicity? A brief consideration of Barth's perspective on authentic human knowing will be helpful here both to advance our primary objective and to focus the issue with respect to Plantinga.

Barth is more emphatic than Plantinga that the agent who is entirely responsible for the possibility of human knowledge of God is God alone. "The Word of God becomes knowable by making itself known."<sup>91</sup> Both Plantinga and Barth see that revelation and redemption are inextricably linked, part of a unified movement of grace by the Spirit ministering Christ in the miracle of faith. Neither redemption nor revelation, therefore, is a human work, though it enlivens and enables human response.<sup>92</sup> Should we then conclude that Moreland and Craig have a legitimate complaint? If God is the active agent

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<sup>88</sup> WCB, 245.

<sup>89</sup> Helm, review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, 1112.

<sup>90</sup> "Certainly, the belief is formed in me, but I am not the one who formed it, and, therefore, I have not truly believed" (Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 169). Morvan and Radcliffe express a similar concern that distinct human personhood is violated if "the Holy Spirit performs this activity as *part* of the person's cognitive system and so as a part of the person herself" (Pierre Le Morvan and Dana Radcliffe, "Notes on Warranted Christian Belief," *Heythrop Journal* 44, no. 3 [2003]: 348).

<sup>91</sup> CD I/1, 246 (KD I/1, 260, "Das Wort Gottes wird erkennbar, indem es sich erkennbar macht").

<sup>92</sup> Appealing to Calvin, Plantinga notes the importance in coming to faith of the "renewal and redirection of affections," for which the Holy Spirit is responsible (WCB, 292).



in the generation of knowledge and belief, is this an obstruction to real human knowing and believing? Barth does not think so. He denies that God's activity implies any human passivity. "If God is seriously involved in experience of the Word of God, then man is just as seriously involved too. The very man who stands in real knowledge of the Word of God also knows himself as existing in the act of his life, as existing in his self-determination."<sup>93</sup> The concern at the bottom of this debate seems to be that of human freedom in Christian belief. While Barth utterly denies the efficacy of human work in revelation, he clearly does not deny human activity, life and freedom. Human freedom, however, is improperly conceived when understood as human autonomy or choice made independently from God. In Barth's view, we are designed for dependence on God, so that the fullest and freest expression of being human is a living and choosing in fellowship with the will and act of God. He writes:

Where God is truly served . . . the willing and doing of God is not just present as a first or second co-operating factor; it is present as the first and decisive thing as befits God the Creator and Lord. Without depriving the human element of its freedom, its earthly substance, its humanity, without obliterating the human subject, or making its activity a purely mechanical event...<sup>94</sup>

Barth acknowledges that there will and must be a human response, but that the power and enabling for this response is also the Spirit's gift. Plantinga's extended A/C model corresponds in most ways to Barth's theology of revelation. Clearly the power to overcome the stifling noetic effects of sin is the work of God in Christ. The knowledge of God is enabled by a spirit-driven process whereby we are given faith. But Plantinga does seem to remain open, in a way that Barth is not, to the possibility of an independent human response serving as a kind of necessary human contribution to the process.<sup>95</sup> There

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<sup>93</sup> *CD* I/1, 200 (*KD* I/1, 209, "So gewiß es sich in der Erfahrung vom Worte Gottes ernstlich um Gott handelt, so gewiß handelt es sich darin auch ernstlich um den Menschen. Gerade der in der wirklichen Erkenntnis des Wortes Gottes stehende Mensch erkennt aber sich selbst durchaus als existierend in der Tat seines Lebens, als existierend in seiner Selbstbestimmung").

<sup>94</sup> *CD* I/1, 94 (*KD* I/1, 96–97).

<sup>95</sup> See *WCB*, 212, where Plantinga agonizes over the problem of evil and the fall, attempting to come to grips with the fact of sin's origination. See also *WCB*, 257, where Plantinga is clear that his model "need take no stand" on the questions of sovereignty and human freedom; though, he is expressly open to the

is agreement, nevertheless, that the primary agency and enabling of the Spirit does not conflict with the full, active and free human engagement.<sup>96</sup>

A related concern could and has been raised with respect to the freedom of the Spirit in the cognitive process of faith.<sup>97</sup> Plantinga is happy to describe the work of the Spirit as an “extraordinary cognitive process or belief-producing mechanism.”<sup>98</sup> This manner of speaking might give the impression that the Spirit himself is conceived to operate impersonally, mechanistically and with predictable necessity. Nothing could of course be further from Barth's conception, where the hallmark of revelation is the freedom of God in his self-revelation.<sup>99</sup> Knowing is left open to the freedom of the object of knowing.<sup>100</sup> Plantinga fully agrees. “Faith doesn't go just by natural laws or regularities, working instead by way of the free cooperation of a person—God himself—whose speaking in Scripture is, of course, free....”<sup>101</sup> The IIHS like the great things of the gospel is understood by Plantinga to be “a result of God's free and gracious action.”<sup>102</sup> The choice of the language of *process* or *mechanism* is strictly with a view to the way in which a freely Spirit-driven enabling of belief might addresses the conditions for warrant. The parallel Plantinga wishes to highlight between the cognitive process of faith and our other cognitive faculties is with the mechanics of warrant, not a ‘mechanism’ of origin. With respect to origin, Plantinga is clear that the work of the Spirit is “extraordinary.”

For both Plantinga and Barth, therefore, Christian belief is free and authentic human knowing made possible by the free decision of God. What then of Helm's concern, that

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possibility that, “There is a contribution to this process that I myself must make, a contribution that I can withhold.”

<sup>96</sup> The implication of this conclusion is that Laura Garcia, Linda Zagzebski and Keith Mascord are incorrect in charging Plantinga with extreme nonvoluntarism regarding belief formation (Garcia, “Natural Theology and the Reformed Objection,” 121–122; Zagzebski, “Religious Knowledge and the Virtues of the Mind,” 202; and, Mascord, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics*, 181–182, 198). Mascord concludes that, for Plantinga, unbelievers “are not the beneficiaries of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit” (182)—a claim that Plantinga never makes.

<sup>97</sup> Morvan and Radcliffe, “Notes on Warranted Christian Belief,” 347–348.

<sup>98</sup> *WCB*, 256.

<sup>99</sup> *CD I/1*, 206 (*KD I/1*, 215). Barth declares, “Revelation is simply the freedom of God's grace” (*CD I/1*, 117; *KD I/1*, 120).

<sup>100</sup> *CD I/1*, 190 (*KD I/1*, 197–198).

<sup>101</sup> *WCB*, 258.

<sup>102</sup> *WCB*, 261.

the integration of the cognitive process of faith with human noetic equipment, occasioned as it is by a reading or hearing of the human testimony of Scripture, serves to threaten the suggestion that Christian belief is being held in the basic way? For Helm, it seems that a thoroughgoing monergism of the Spirit which ruled out human participation might safeguard proper basicity. But this objection possesses the same defect encountered in the objections to proper basicity in Plantinga's A/C model. It is sufficient for basicity that what grounds one's belief is not inference from other beliefs. It is sufficient for the *properness* of basicity if the beliefs so held have sufficient warrant. It is not required for basicity that a belief originate *ex nihilo* and without any connection to the rest of human thinking, willing and believing. As for warrant, it seems to me that Plantinga's model clearly conforms to the conditions for warrant he earlier develops.

*The Extended A/C Model: Individualism and the Community of Believers*

Another common objection to Plantinga's extended A/C model is that it is "radically individualist"<sup>103</sup> and fails to appreciate the nurturing role of believing communities.<sup>104</sup> If the driving component of Plantinga's model is the *internal* instigation of the Holy Spirit, acting upon the individual, is it fair to suggest that the role of the church in shaping Christian belief has been neglected? For Barth, a strictly individualist knowledge of God would be inconceivable.<sup>105</sup> The subject of the knowledge of God is never people in general or the isolated individual but always the "man in the Church."<sup>106</sup> But, it is important to note that this being in the church does not, for Barth, become a ground or basis for our knowledge of God, anymore than association with the Christian community provides warrant in Plantinga's scheme. Barth maintains that the church is not an independent entity any more than the individual. The church to whom the knowledge of

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<sup>103</sup> Terrence W. Tilley, "Warranted Christian Belief," review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 389.

<sup>104</sup> Harris, "Does Analytical Philosophy Clip our Wings?," 100–118. These critiques are indicative of a wider trend which largely dismisses the value of the analytic approach as "(white western) masculinist: individualist, cut off from the body, from emotion, from humour, from collaboration, and from creative imagination" (Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998], 69).

<sup>105</sup> The revelation of God is given to the church, such that "there is no possibility of dogmatics at all outside the Church" (*CD* I/1, 17; *KD* I/1, 16, "Dogmatik außerhalb der Kirche ist keine Möglichkeit").

<sup>106</sup> *CD* I/1, 189, emphasis added (*KD* I/1, 197, "den Menschen in der Kirche").

God is given is always the church of *Jesus Christ*.<sup>107</sup> Revelation in Christ given to the church by the Spirit is the only possible basis for knowledge of God.

Where does this leave Plantinga's model? Do the charges of individualism and ecclesial neglect stick? The short answer is, no; but, to see why we need to disentangle two assertions easily confused in the critique. The first assertion is about proper function for fundamentally relational beings, where the nurturing *koinonia* of the community of faith is seen to be decisive for Christian belief formation. The second assertion is drawn from reflection on the social construction of belief, and asseverates that the community of faith itself provides at least part of the warrant for Christian belief. I contend that Barth and Plantinga each affirm the first and deny the second.

Starting with the second assertion, we should recognize that, despite his detractors, Plantinga does acknowledge the importance of Christian community as the context within which properly basic belief develops.<sup>108</sup> "It is the church or community that proclaims the gospel, guides the neophyte into it, and supports, instructs, encourages, and edifies believers of all sorts and conditions."<sup>109</sup> But this does not mean that the community somehow anchors the warrant for their own belief. If it did there might be some truth to the unexpected conclusion of Harriet Harris that "Plantinga tends toward the view, though he does not state it, that the degree to which a belief is warranted depends on how many people hold it."<sup>110</sup> We can also easily rule out the suggestion that Plantinga's defense of the privileged epistemic status of the beliefs of the Christian community is in the neighborhood of "epistemological behaviorism."<sup>111</sup> What warrants these beliefs is not their being believed, but the truth of what they confess regarding the redemptive and revelatory purposes of God. Denying that the church is the primary source of warrant for Christian belief, does not imply a denial of a vital role for the church in the formation of Christian belief.

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<sup>107</sup> CD I/1, 257 (KD I/1, 197, "Ist ihr als der Kirche Jesu Christi das Wort Gottes nicht übergeben").

<sup>108</sup> RBG, 33–34; WCB, 202. Beilby seems to overstate Plantinga's silence on the role of the Christian community, though draws the right conclusion that Plantinga's model does not undercut such a role (*Epistemology as Theology*, 184–185; and, "Plantinga's Model of Warranted Christian Belief," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Deane-Peter Baker [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 140–141).

<sup>109</sup> WCB, 244 n8.

<sup>110</sup> "Does Analytical Philosophy Clip our Wings?," 112.

<sup>111</sup> J. Wesley Robbins, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14, no. 4 (1983): 246.

Another way of approaching this question is to ask whether openness to a role for the church in shaping Christian belief threatens the propriety of accepting Christian belief in the basic way. Some critics who want to see from Plantinga more acknowledgement of the social constructedness of knowledge assume that this would inevitably undermine basicity. Terrence Tilley declares that if an account of belief formation were to include the “social practices which trigger those beliefs . . . then our basic beliefs will be shown to be based on others’ beliefs and the practices we share with them.”<sup>112</sup> This is, however, either a *non-sequitur* or fundamentally confused about the nature of basicity with respect to belief. A belief that is based on the received testimony of another person, may not be based on some other belief in one’s belief structure. For this reason Plantinga counts *credulity* as one of our distinct rational powers “whereby we learn from others.”<sup>113</sup> It is not as though belief in testimony must pass through an intermediating inference from the belief that the witness is trustworthy. One may in fact hold a belief in the general trustworthiness of a witness without that belief serving as a basis for accepting the truth of the testimony conveyed. It is perhaps better to think of beliefs generated by the acceptance of testimony as conditional on the lack of a defeater for the truthfulness of the testimony. *Credulity* implies a default position of trust that requires no further inferential propping up.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, even if it were true that on Plantinga’s model warrant for Christian belief is transferred from human testimony, this would not threaten the basicity of that belief. The fact is, however, that Plantinga’s model does not posit human testimony as the source of warrant for Christian belief. Instead, human testimony becomes an essential occasioning condition in the process whereby we are given a view

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<sup>112</sup> Terrence W Tilley, “Reformed Epistemology and Religious Fundamentalism: How Basic are our Basic Beliefs,” *Modern Theology* 6, no. 3 (1990): 254. Similarly, Frank Schubert argues that to the extent that belief depends on ancestral testimony it is “belief which is not properly basic” (Frank Schubert, “Is Ancestral Testimony Foundational Evidence for God’s Existence?,” *Religious Studies* 27 [1991], 499–500).

<sup>113</sup> *WCB*, 147. Because of Swinburne’s acceptance of a “Principle of Credulity,” Plantinga does not consider him an evidentialist (*WCB*, 91 n43).

<sup>114</sup> What further confuses the notion of basicity when considering beliefs based on testimony is that while the beliefs may be properly accepted in the basic way, there is an additional dependency in the transfer of warrant such that “belief on the part of the testiffee has warrant only if that belief has warrant for the testifier” (*WPF*, 86).

of the truth<sup>115</sup> by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>116</sup> The importance of Scripture and the church are not diminished, but they do not function as the *ultimate* warranting basis for Christian belief.

The significance of the community of believers to the formation of Christian belief is, of course, not exhausted by its service in the process of relaying the message of the gospel. It also serves as the arena of personal relationship within which believers encounter and live out the transforming truth of that gospel. If this is true, then the church is used by God in the restoration of proper function and in the creation of suitable environments for growth in faith. Admittedly, Plantinga does not spend a great deal of time on the role of the community of faith in the facilitation and restoration of proper function. But, with reference to our earlier caution, it is important to understand what Plantinga is and is not intending to achieve in his volumes on Christian epistemology. He is not attempting a comprehensive account of all aspects involved in a thick description of Christian belief formation. He is sketching an intentionally minimalist structure to give account of the principle way in which Christian belief receives warrant. In this account Plantinga mentions the importance of the gradual repairing of proper function and the criticality of suitable environment without becoming entrenched in the details. In agreement with Barth, Plantinga affirms that the principle means of restoration and revelation is the work of Spirit applying the redemption of Christ. This does not nullify the fact that one chief way in which the Spirit works is in and through communities of faith, as Plantinga himself notes: "Presented in this brief and undeveloped way, this model can seem unduly individualistic. But of course it doesn't at all preclude the importance of the Christian community and the church to the belief of the individual Christian."<sup>117</sup> Leaving this aspect of Christian belief formation undeveloped does not, mean that there is something deficient in Plantinga's account of warrant. There is no

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<sup>115</sup> Plantinga frequently refers to the work of the IHS as enabling the human knower to have some kind of direct apprehension of the truth (e.g. *WCB*, 83, 256, 281, 302, 340). It is a great distortion, however, to thereby conclude as Christopher Insole does that this being afforded a view for oneself implies a "rational self-sufficiency" (Christopher J. Insole, "Political Liberalism, Analytical Philosophy of Religion and the Forgetting of History," in *Faith and Philosophical Analysis: The Impact of Analytical Philosophy on the Philosophy of Religion* [Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005], 160).

<sup>116</sup> In Plantinga's model Christian belief is based on an extraordinary kind of testimony, the testimony of the Holy Spirit, which uniquely includes our being enabled to grasp the truth of the testimony. See *WCB*, 252.

<sup>117</sup> *WCB*, 244 n8.

deficiency because, on Plantinga's model, warrant does not originate from the Christian community wherein it arises. This also answers Beilby's concern that "if most of the interesting and efficacious work is being done by the *sensus divinitatis* and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, what of importance is left for the Christian community to do?"<sup>118</sup> Although the Christian community does not itself ground the connection between belief formation and the truth of what is being believed, it may still be critical to suitable cognitive environment and proper function. Rather than lament Plantinga's lack of detail here we should appreciate the openness of his theologically oriented structure for developing fuller accounts of the formation of warranted Christian belief.<sup>119</sup> Constructively these critiques are helpful in pointing out the connectedness of cognitive environment and proper function. Part of the restoration of proper function, facilitating the fluid transfer of warrant, driven by the self-revelation of God, is the Spirit's work to engender conducive *ecclesial* cognitive environments.

*The Extended A/C Model: Can Human Arguments Defeat Christian Belief?*

Theological knowledge of the kind most central to Christian belief is not established by philosophical argument on Plantinga's account. But this leaves open the possibility of a negative role for philosophical arguments. Does Plantinga grant to philosophy the power to undercut or diminish the warrant for Christian belief? Does a human argument have the power to torpedo the work of the IHS in the cognitive process of faith? In our earlier discussion of *defeaters* we clarified that an argument that refutes and argument against belief (a *defeater-defeater*) does not supply warrant for a belief, but removes obstructions to warrant. For this reason defeater-defeaters, while sometimes crucial to warrant transfer, do not alter the proper basicity of a belief. The question we are raising now is not about the role of defeater-defeaters, but the nature of the possibility of defeaters in the extended A/C model. Though human arguments are not needed for belief to have warrant according to the model, is it possible that human arguments could inhibit specifically the warrant for Christian belief instigated by the Holy Spirit? And, if so, how

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<sup>118</sup> Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology*, 185.

<sup>119</sup> Areas for expansion might include, detailing what inter-personal structures are essential to a favorable cognitive environment, and unpacking the significance for proper function of properly functioning communities of faith.

does this not clearly constitute what Barth would deem a gross violation on the part of philosophy?

The issues surrounding this question are easily confused, as we saw in our earlier discussion of defeater-defeaters; therefore, it will serve us well to briefly highlight the salient features of Plantinga's understanding of the nature of defeaters. A *defeater* is a belief that is rationally in tension with another belief which it either fully or partially defeats, thus requiring the suspension or attenuation of the defeated belief.<sup>120</sup> But this definition really only applies to the most commonly discussed kind of defeater, what Plantinga calls a *rationality defeater*. Rationality defeasibility understood to result from beliefs in conflict is a concern of the proper function of *internal rationality*. Earlier we saw that internal rationality has to do with forming the right beliefs on the basis of experience. But, for Plantinga, this also requires conducting some epistemic due diligence, such as ensuring the sufficient coherence of one's beliefs, looking for defeaters and considering objections.<sup>121</sup> We may recall, however, that in Plantinga's system internal rationality is only one aspect of the delivery of warrant. It is possible to have what Plantinga calls a *warrant defeater* which is not a belief in conflict with another belief, but is instead a failure of some kind in the noetic processes upon which we depend.<sup>122</sup> Given the facets of warrant elucidated by Plantinga, this could be a failure in the truth orientation of our design plan, the appropriateness of our environment with respect to that plan, or cognitive function—perhaps in the area of external rationality.

With respect to the defeasibility of Christian belief, therefore, we can see at least two closely related concerns. The first is whether Christian belief might be undermined by antagonistic philosophical arguments; the second is whether warrant might be impeded by a wider range of epistemic problems. Our primary concern here is with the first of these—rationality defeaters from philosophical arguments. Warrant defeaters due to epistemic

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<sup>120</sup> Plantinga follows the penetrative work of John Pollock on defeaters, including his original distinction between *Type I* (rebutting) and *Type II* (undercutting) defeaters. See John L. Pollock, "The Structure of Epistemic Justification," *American Philosophical Quarterly* monograph series 4 (1970); and, John L. Pollock and Joseph Cruz, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 2nd ed., Studies in Epistemology and Cognitive Theory (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 195–202. Plantinga calls defeasibility a "crucial but puzzling notion" (*WCD*, 216). His most involved treatments can be found in *WCD*, 216–221; *WCB*, 357–367 and "Naturalism Defeated" (unpublished, 1994; available at <http://www.homestead.com/philofreligion/files/alspaper.htm>).

<sup>121</sup> *WCB*, 112, 255.

<sup>122</sup> *WCB*, 359–360.



problems caused by the noetic effects of sin are fully expected by both Barth and Plantinga. The work of the Spirit, repairing the damage of sin, may be done, “gradually or suddenly, to a greater or lesser extent.”<sup>123</sup> Plantinga speaks of *paradigmatic* instances of faith,<sup>124</sup> but full and complete repair of our cognitive faculties and environments is an eschatological reality. This suggests a provisional answer to the question of the defeasibility of Christian belief in general: the extent to which warrant defeat of the deliverances of faith is possible is directly related to the extent that the noetic effects of sin distort proper function and render our environments misleading. But does this adequately address the specific question of rationality defeat? Maybe so, if all instances of the rationality defeat of Christian belief arise from an error stemming from cognitive malfunction or a misleading cognitive environment.<sup>125</sup>

There is good reason to think that in Plantinga's view this provisional answer does extend to all instances of the defeat of Christian belief including the possibility of the defeat of Christian belief by philosophical argument. If this is true, then the possibility of the defeat of Christian belief by philosophical argument is not explained by the inherent power of human argument, but arises only as a consequence of the impact of human sin. The power of reason to undermine faith is a reality created by an underlying epistemic distortion which disrupts the service of reason in the formation of true beliefs. This understanding of the nature of the rationality defeasibility of Christian belief is the inevitable consequence of Plantinga's other commitments. The nature of defeasibility in general obviously depends on a commitment to the principle of non-contradiction. If Christian belief is true then any belief which either contradicts or entails a contradiction with it must be false; and, no false belief can have warrant. On Plantinga's general scheme, false beliefs can be traced back to problems in the truth orientation of the design plan, unsuitable environments and/or improper cognitive function upstream or downstream from experience. But if Christian belief is true, there is no problem with the truth orientation of the design plan with respect to Christian belief.<sup>126</sup> We can conclude,

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<sup>123</sup> WCB, 244.

<sup>124</sup> WCB, 256, 260, 264.

<sup>125</sup> In this argument I am assuming that anything in our environments which would mislead us with respect to the proper deliverances of faith can be understood to be an environmental consequence of sin.

<sup>126</sup> It may be that aspects of the design plan are aimed at things other than true belief or things *in addition to* true belief, but clearly for Plantinga the part of the design plan that governs the formation of Christian belief is aimed at true belief. See WPF, 195, as well as WCB, 257.

therefore, that all instances of the rationality defeat of Christian belief arise from an error stemming from cognitive malfunction or a misleading cognitive environment. In other words, any philosophical argument which contradicts Christian belief arises from some underlying epistemic problem, is therefore unwarranted and consequently cannot count as knowledge.

Should we conclude, therefore, that according to Plantinga any belief that contradicts Christian belief is irrational and unjustified? Not at all. Plantinga's position is fully consistent with the reasonability of philosophical arguments against Christian belief and with the justification of accepting their conclusions. This is in fact one of the great strengths of the sophistication and nuance of Plantinga's epistemology. Warrant involves a number of considerations wholly external to the human faculty of reason, and the fulfillment of epistemic duties. Arguments against Christian belief may be reasonable and one may be justified in believing their conclusions—even though the resulting beliefs fail to have warrant. Arguments against Christian belief may be valid, while relying on dodgy premises. Assessment of probability may be accurate, but background knowledge skewed. Plantinga's system does not suggest that the work of the Spirit makes Christian believers smarter than unbelievers in terms of their felicity with logic, their ability to avoid incoherence within their network of beliefs, or their capacity to deduce entailment. The principal cognitive work of the Spirit, on Plantinga's model, is to give a perception of the truth of Christian belief. This involves an initiation of the repair of the noetic effects of sin, but does not necessarily transform believers into brilliant philosophers. Just as unbelieving philosophers with high functioning faculties of reason can be justified in believing Christianity false without knowing that their beliefs lack warrant, so also the warranted beliefs of simple-minded Christian believers are rational and justified without any complex reasoning process required to support them.<sup>127</sup>

But can the simple-minded Christian really be justified in their belief without defeater-defeaters for known objections to Christian belief? Is it rational to accept Christian belief in the face of known objections for which one has no refutation whatsoever? The answer to this depends on what might count as *refutation*. Plantinga advises that we not narrow our notion of refutation to merely that which takes the form of a philosophical counter

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<sup>127</sup> By 'reasoning process' I mean just that work done by the faculty of reason to determine the "deductive and probabilistic relations among propositions" (WCB, 78). The wider *cognitive* process supporting belief is the robust cognitive process of faith by the IIHS.

argument. Resolution of belief conflict may be conducted purely on the basis of the relative strength of warrant of the beliefs themselves. In Plantinga's parlance, a belief which is in a stronger position with respect to warrant may serve as an *intrinsic* defeater-defeater for a conflicting belief.<sup>128</sup> One may find oneself unconvinced by an argument or evidence not on the basis of any deficiency seen in it, but simply because the conclusion conflicts with a belief that has a firmer footing.<sup>129</sup> Plantinga's contention here is similar to G. E. Moore's response to Hume on skepticism about the existence of material objects.<sup>130</sup> The move Moore makes has become known as Moore's *shift*. Rather than taking on the validity of the argument or the truth of the premises, one may simply have a more firmly held belief that the conclusion is not true. In this case then the refutation of the objection is just to restate the objection as a *reductio ad absurdum*.<sup>131</sup> If it is true that—if the argument is valid and the premises are true then the conclusion must follow—then, if we are in a stronger position to see that the conclusion is not true, we are safe to conclude that the argument has a problem, without needing to identify that problem precisely. For Moore on perception, it is perfectly rational to maintain that the direct perceptual experience of a material object provides the best refutation of Hume's potential defeater. For Plantinga, the deliverances of faith, if strong enough, may provide the best refutation for any particular objection to belief.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>128</sup> "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 3, no. 3 (1986): 311–312. Philip Quinn, to whom Plantinga is replying, accepts the possibility of intrinsic defeater-defeaters, but doubts that typical believers have enough warrant for their theistic beliefs to operate as intrinsic defeater-defeaters for all the potential defeaters typically encountered. See Quinn, "The Foundations of Theism Again," 39. Similarly, see Sudduth, "The Internalist Character and Evidentialist Implications of Plantingian Defeaters," 181–182.

<sup>129</sup> Plantinga's classic example pits a person's memory beliefs against circumstantial evidence. See "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," 310; or, *WCB*, 371. Following Chisholm, Plantinga calls this approach 'particularism' (*RBG*, 77–78). See Roderick M. Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973), 15.

<sup>130</sup> From a lecture delivered in 1911 at Morley College in London, "Hume's Theory Examined," in *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Humanities Press, 1953), 108–126.

<sup>131</sup> Or as Plantinga suggests, if your belief in God is firmer than your belief in the premises of an argument against that belief, "you would go *modus tollens* and take it that you had an argument against the premises" (from an unpublished letter to Kelly J. Clark, printed in his "Plantinga vs. Oliphint: And the Winner Is..." *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 [1998]: 164n).

<sup>132</sup> This includes the objection that Plantinga must provide an *independent* reason for believing that there is such a thing as the IHS. The deliverances of the cognitive process of faith themselves provide the

According to the extended A/C model there is no inherent tension between faith and reason. Where tensions do arise this may suggest no deficiency of reasoning, but rather a lingering hindrance in environment or proper function. By distinguishing warrant from rationality and justification Plantinga is able to show that one may be both rational and justified in accepting the deliverances of faith over the conclusions of philosophical argument. The fact that philosophical arguments may swamp weak or fluctuating faith, is not because reason is conceived to be a rival or independent source of knowledge, but because its exercise in the pursuit of truth is dependent upon broader epistemic conditions darkened by sin. It should be clear, therefore, that for Plantinga Christian belief does not require the tools of reason for it to be rational and it need not enter the fray of philosophical exchange for it to be justified.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to show that there is a striking compatibility between Plantinga's approach to Christian epistemology and Barth's theology of revelation. In chapter 3 we looked at Plantinga's understanding of Christian philosophy and its relationship to theology, along with his general account of epistemic warrant. There we found that Plantinga not only affirms Barth's rejection of various potential philosophical encroachments on theological knowing but also offers further philosophical argument against them. The same set of assumed obligations and human epistemic responsibilities that Barth decried as noetic works righteousness, Plantinga also rebuffs as neither necessary nor sufficient for knowledge. What is critical for knowledge, that is, warranted true belief, is functioning according to the right kind of truth oriented design in a suitable environment. This, along with Plantinga's externalism and inductive procedure, yield an epistemology of Christian belief that derives ultimately "from outside all human

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grounds for concluding that Plantinga's model or something like it is correct. Evan Fales fails to grasp this when he suggests that "the morally checkered history of Christendom, and the conflicting moral testimony of Scripture" count as *prima facie* defeaters for Plantinga's model in the absence of some kind of *independent* validation of the IIHS (Evan Fales, review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, by Alvin Plantinga, *Noûs* 37, no. 2 [2003]: 363–364). For Plantinga, the work of the Spirit produces an intrinsic defeater-defeater.

possibilities.”<sup>133</sup> In this chapter we examined Plantinga's models for theistic and specifically Christian belief, taking special note of key objections and potential tensions with Barth's theology of revelation. It should be evident that Plantinga agrees with Barth that what is beyond human possibilities is possible with God. Plantinga sees the knowledge of God to be divinely initiated—“from the acting of God Himself.” The gift of faith in its paradigmatic forms is the gift of knowing that we know by the special instigation of the Holy Spirit. Demonstration of the truth of what is known is neither required for knowledge, nor is it even within the competency of philosophy to offer.<sup>134</sup> Despite all the philosophical weaponry Plantinga mobilizes, Herrmann's expression of a knowledge of God “wholly without weapons” still applies in the sense that Barth so enthusiastically endorsed. What anchors the warrant for and therefore strength of our belief is not the strength of arguments in its favor, but the very content of the truth that is believed. Moreover, the priority in origination and formation of Christian belief resides with the free action of God, without at any point undermining or overriding its thoroughgoing humanness. These are strong alignments between Barth and Plantinga on the knowledge of God.

We also flagged some potentially critical areas of tension between Barth and Plantinga on the knowledge of God. These areas are significant enough to require devoted attention if we are to answer our primary question on the nature and extent of the compatibility and complementarity of their work. What we have seen thus far is that two giants, one in Christian theology and the other in Christian philosophy, sharing crucial core commitments but taking seemingly antagonistic approach vectors, enjoy an enormous amount of agreement about the nature of and means to human knowledge of God. Complementarity is found in the unique questions each seeks to answer and the different discussions to which each contributes. To press the boundaries of this compatibility we

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<sup>133</sup> Quoted earlier, Barth maintains that the knowledge of God “derives and is to be considered only from outside all human possibilities, i.e., from the acting of God Himself” (*CD* I/1, 38; *KD* I/1, 38).

<sup>134</sup> The *from above* approach means that we are in a position of dependence where our only option is to trust. Plantinga points out that this is true of all kinds of human knowing. In his response to Steup's distinction between the use and function of cognitive faculties, Plantinga notes: “at a certain basic level I must simply trust my cognitive faculties; I have no alternative. At that basic level, the issue of using them well or ill doesn't arise: how they function and whether they function reliably (a) isn't up to me, and (b) is such that I can't determine it without assuming it” (“Reliabilism, Analyses and Defeaters,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, no. 2 [1995]: 444).

will now enter an exploration of the dissonances that have presented themselves in our analysis up to this point. In chapter 5 we will look at Barth's notorious and unrelenting ban on both apologetics and natural theology alongside Plantinga's endorsement of a *natural* knowledge of God by means of a divinely given human cognitive capacity and his openness to a role for apologetics. In chapter 6 we will examine potential differences in their conceptions of the fundamental character of faith and what constitutes genuine human knowledge of God.

PART III:  
EVALUATING POTENTIAL  
DISCONTINUITIES BETWEEN  
BARTH AND PLANTINGA

## NATURAL THEOLOGY: WHAT IS THE REFORMED OBJECTION?

If English-speaking philosophers of religion know one thing about Karl Barth it is that he emphatically denounces natural theology.<sup>1</sup> In theological circles as well, Barth's position on natural theology is considered to be entrenched and uncompromising, or "simply preposterous."<sup>2</sup> Anthony Thiselton expresses the widely held view that Barth is "the most outspoken opponent of natural theology in modern times."<sup>3</sup> On this basis, it is reasonable to suspect that we would find sharp differences between Plantinga and Barth. The critical task is to specify where precisely the differences lie and to assess their

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9; Nancey Murphy, "Theology and Scientific Methodology," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 2001), 514; and, Richard Swinburne, "The Value and Christian Roots of Analytical Philosophy of Religion," in *Faith and Philosophical Analysis: The Impact of Analytical Philosophy on the Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Harriet A. Harris and Christopher J. Insole (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005), 41.

<sup>2</sup> James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: the Gifford Lectures for 1991, Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9. Wolfhart Pannenberg suggests that Barth takes Ritschl's negative view of natural theology to an 'extreme' (*Offenbarung als Geschichte*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg, 3. Aufl. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965], 7).

<sup>3</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 196.



significance. Since natural theology is one strategy for bridging philosophy and theology,<sup>4</sup> significant disagreement here could threaten broader conclusions about compatibility and complementarity between Barth's theology of revelation and Plantinga's epistemology of Christian belief.

Initial impressions are not all bad in this case. Barth and Plantinga share some measure of agreement about natural theology—both raise vocal objections to it.<sup>5</sup> Though Barth's objection certainly appears to be more categorical than is Plantinga's. Plantinga, we will see, remains open to a limited role for natural theology, which Barth resists. The task of penetrating the differences between Barth and Plantinga is made somewhat easier by Plantinga's own consideration of Barth's position.<sup>6</sup> Plantinga agrees with what he understands to be Barth's primary motivation, but withdraws from Barth's "*in toto*" rejection.<sup>7</sup> No doubt this blanket rejection is in mind when Plantinga later cites Barth as an 'extreme example' of a theological objection to natural theology.<sup>8</sup> Plantinga's treatment of Barth, however, does not engage with the full scope of Barth's concern, and, while highly valuable, is for this reason only of limited use. One of our aims, therefore, will be to identify those aspects of Barth's position which Plantinga does not examine and evaluate their impact on the debate.

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to pinpointing where Plantinga and Barth agree and disagree on the question of natural theology. We will begin with an exploration of the driving concerns which motivate Barth's 'extreme' position, and clarify just what was the *natürliche Theologie* he so spurned. We will then take a look at

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Brian Hebblethwaite, who considers Barth's objection to natural theology to be extreme; and, therefore, unhelpful to Hebblethwaite's hopes for a "rapprochement between the philosophers and the theologians" (*Philosophical Theology and Christian Doctrine* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2005], 5).

<sup>5</sup> Barth's most famous and forceful objection is, of course, his *Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner*, (München: Kaiser, 1934). Plantinga sees his own views as aligned with a traditional Reformed objection to natural theology. See *RGB*, 63–73; "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," in *Philosophical Knowledge* (Washington, DC: American Catholic Philosophical Assoc, 1980); "The Reformed Objection Revisited," *Christian Scholar's Review*, 12 (1983); and, "The Prospects for Natural Theology," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991).

<sup>6</sup> *RGB*, 68–72. The only aspect of Barth's theology that Plantinga has written on is Barth's rejection of natural theology.

<sup>7</sup> "The Reformed Objection Revisited," *Christian Scholar's Review* 12 (1983): 58.

<sup>8</sup> "Natural Theology," in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, eds. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995), 347.

Plantinga's engagement with Barth and Plantinga's explanation of his own position. In conclusion, I will assess the significance of our findings and determine if and how we might need to revise what has been, up to this point, a positive assessment of the compatibility, complementarity and centrolineality of their thought.

## ***Part I: Barth's Driving Concerns and the Natural Theology he Rejects***

Most of what we need in order to understand Barth's rejection of natural theology has already been unearthed in the first two chapters. What we will attempt here is an unpacking of the implications which Barth himself saw for the question of natural theology.

### *Rejecting the Move from Below*

Barth's primary motivation for rejecting natural theology is no different than his primary concern about the relationship between philosophy and theology. T. F. Torrance captures it well when he writes: "what Barth objects to in natural theology is not its rational structure as such but its *independent* character, i.e. the autonomous rational structure which it develops on the ground of 'nature alone' in abstraction from the active self-disclosure of the living God."<sup>9</sup> If it were reason, *per se*, that Barth was objecting to then we might be able to understand him as a thoroughgoing Ritschlian—positing a chasm between nature and grace. Instead, for Barth, the fundamental problem with natural theology is its presumption of an independently accessible knowledge of God on the basis of an innate human capacity. We saw in chapter 2 that, when it comes to theological knowing, Barth rejects the *general starting-point assumption* and the *accessibility requirement* of Enlightenment modernism. In both cases we saw that Barth's underlying conviction is that the knowledge of God cannot be established *from below* on the basis of human thought or capacity, but only *from above* on the basis of divine self-revelation. So just as Barth, in rejecting philosophy's pretension to have access to an independent source of the knowledge of God, does not reject philosophy *per se*—the very realm in which theology must inevitably do its business—so also with human reason, he

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, "The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth," *Religious Studies* 6 (1970): 128.

does not dismiss or reduce its importance and centrality. He is quite clear that the knowledge of God by faith in the grace of divine self-revelation is a communication of divine reason (*Vernunft*) with human reason. “The encounter of God and man takes place primarily, pre-eminently and characteristically in this sphere of *ratio*.”<sup>10</sup> The problem with natural theology is not the importance assigned to human reason but its latent presumption that human reason could provide neutral and independent access to the knowledge of God apart from encounter with and transformation by God.

A similarly qualified, positive claim can be made for creation, history, culture and humanity. While these all lack an inherent capacity to effect revelation, Barth is still able to affirm their role in the activity of divine self-revealing. In a 1926 lecture which has proven confusing for some interpreters,<sup>11</sup> Barth is content to affirm that there is a “buried and forgotten truth of creation,” and that “culture can be a witness.” He even hints that there might be an acceptable way of conceiving of natural theology!<sup>12</sup> These statements, however, can prove rather misleading without the crucial qualification that creation and culture are only instruments of revelation by the grace of Jesus Christ in the activity of divine self-revealing. Nevertheless, as instruments, the mediums God freely chooses to use are not insignificant, arbitrary, or inconsequential.<sup>13</sup> Bruce McCormack helpfully

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<sup>10</sup> CD I/1, 135 (*KD* I/1, 139, “daß sich die Begegnung von Gott und Mensch . . . zuerst, vorzüglich und charakteristisch in dieser Sphäre, der Sphäre der *ratio* . . . abspielt”).

<sup>11</sup> “Die Kirche und die Kultur,” in *Vorträge und Kleinere Arbeiten, 1925–1930*, Gesamtausgabe, ed. Hermann Schmidt (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1926), ET: “Church and Culture,” trans. Louise Pettibone Smith, in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920–1928* (London: SCM, 1926). Hans Urs von Balthasar believes that Barth’s rift with Brunner arose because Barth did not stick to his 1926 position (*Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung Seiner Theologie* [Köln: J. Hegner, 1951], 96). I will argue that there is no discontinuity between Barth’s objection to Brunner’s natural theology and his statements in the 1926 lecture.

<sup>12</sup> “Church and Culture,” 342–343 (“Die Kirche und die Kultur,” 22–24). See also CD I/1, 130–131 (*KD* I/1, 134).

<sup>13</sup> Barth’s notorious comment about the freedom of God to speak through any creaturely medium could easily be taken to indicate the arbitrariness of the medium. “God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog” (CD I/1, 55; *KD* I/1, 55–56). To conclude this would be to ignore Barth’s warning which immediately follows, that unless we consider ourselves to be prophets of a new church our proclamation is to be based on “an exposition of some portion of the biblical witness to revelation.” Ignoring the secular form of the word would be the hallmark of “idealistic theology” which is for Barth “bad theology” (CD I/1, 175; *KD* I/1, 182). See also

recommends distinguishing between the *locus* of revelation and the “source (the power) by means of which revelation (in the Bible or in nature and history) [is] actualized.”<sup>14</sup> It is accurate to say that on Barth’s view, Emil Brunner did not adequately grasp this distinction.

The legendary exchange between Barth and Brunner in 1934 is Barth’s most resolute statement against natural theology, and is particularly helpful in distinguishing Barth’s view from other objections to natural theology. Brunner seems to have heard Barth’s positive statements, but failed to comprehend their strict qualifications, thereby overestimating Barth’s agreement with his own position.<sup>15</sup> Barth perceives that by beginning with a human “capacity for revelation” (*Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*) Brunner fails to maintain the absoluteness of human dependence on God for the knowledge of God.<sup>16</sup> This move inevitably leads to a suppression and distortion of revelation with potentially disastrous consequences, like those playing out in Germany at the very time Barth was writing. Barth’s acerbic reply to Brunner should be viewed in light of the capitulation of German Christians to Nazi national theology and the alarming events beginning in 1933 which involved an appeal to German culture as a source of natural revelation.<sup>17</sup>

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Trevor Hart’s helpful discussion in *Regarding Karl Barth: Essays Toward a Reading of His Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 19-26.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1995), 306n.

<sup>15</sup> Brunner, *Natur und Gnade: Zum Gespräch mit Karl Barth* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1934), 6, ET: “Nature and Grace,” trans. Peter Fraenkel, in *Natural Theology*, ed. John Baillie (London: The Centenary Press, 1934), 18–19.

<sup>16</sup> “No! Answer to Emil Brunner,” trans. Peter Fraenkel, in *Natural Theology*, ed. John Baillie (London: The Centenary Press, 1934), 78 (*Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner*, 16).

<sup>17</sup> Particularly in mind here is the establishment of the German Evangelical Church, its assimilation with the state, and the appointment of the *Reichsbischof*. In 1933, Barth writes, “Die frage, die die deutsche Kirchenreform bisher vor anderen charakterisierte, und alsbald zum wenig schönen Kirchenstreit werden ließ, war die Bischofsfrage. Man möchte wohl wissen können, wie sich später die Kirchengeschichte mit dem Rätsel auseinandersetzen wird: welche ernsthaften, inneren, theologisch relevanten Gründe dazu vorlagen, daß in der kirchlichen Bewegung des Jahres 1933 ausgerechnet diese Frage solche Bedeutung bekommen konnte, wie sie sie nun bekommen hat?” (*Theologische Existenz heute!* 1 [München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1933], 13–14).

Despite Brunner's protests, Barth contends that by allowing a revelation that issues *from below*, Brunner violates the Reformers' *sola gratia*.<sup>18</sup> Brunner's surprise and confusion over Barth's rebuke leads to one of the most illuminating aspects of the debate. Brunner assumes that he and Barth are in essential agreement, each rejecting a natural theology that begins *from below* independent of the light of grace. He claims to stand with the Reformers in insisting that, "the light of the revelation in Christ must shine into nature in order to light up this foundation."<sup>19</sup> He then distinguishes this view from what he understands to be the positions of Roman Catholicism and Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>20</sup> This is helpful in that it provides us with at least three alternative positions on natural theology that can be contrasted usefully to distinguish Barth's own position.

### *Brunner, Roman Catholicism and Enlightenment Rationalism*

Of the four positions Brunner identifies, Enlightenment rationalism clearly offers the most permissive or optimistic attitude toward natural theology. On this view, human reason apart from grace becomes the sole and independent organ for arriving at knowledge of God. Divine special revelation is subordinated in such a way as to become irrelevant or is denied altogether. Barth and Brunner agree that such a positivistic view of natural theology must be opposed, and their agreement seems to stem from a shared opinion about the limitations of human reason. The optimism of Enlightenment rationalism regarding the essential capacities and uncorrupted condition of human reason makes it untenable. The limitations of human reason, however, arise from two considerations which should be highlighted separately—limitations that obtain as a result of human sin, and limitations that obtain merely as a consequence of being human. With respect to the noetic effects of sin, it would seem that Barth and Brunner generally agree. According to Barth, "the discernment of the creation of man which is also the revelation of God, has, however, been taken from us by the fall, at least according to Reformation ideas of the extent of sin, and it is restored to us in the Gospel, in *revelatio specialis*."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "No!" 80, 85 (*Nein!*, 17, 22).

<sup>19</sup> "Nature and Grace," 47 (*Natur und Gnade*, 33, "das Licht der Christusoffenbarung auch in die Natur hineinzünden muß").

<sup>20</sup> "Nature and Grace," 45–48 (*Natur und Gnade*, 32–34).

<sup>21</sup> *CD* I/1, 130 (*KD* I/1, 134, "die Einsicht in die Schöpfung des Menschen, die als solche auch Offenbarung Gottes ist, ist uns aber durch den Sündenfall jedenfalls nach den reformatorischen

But for Brunner, once the blindness of sin is removed by the grace of Jesus Christ there is restored a human capacity to grasp a rudimentary knowledge of God “imprinted” on creation.<sup>22</sup> So, for Brunner, natural theology, rightly construed, is not a “self-sufficient rational system.”<sup>23</sup> We must begin with the grace of special revelation *from above*, which then enables a proper general revelation *from below*. For this reason, Brunner can give qualifications that appear quite compatible with Barth’s position. For instance, Brunner states, “Only the Christian, *i.e.* the man who stands within the revelation in Christ, has the true natural knowledge of God.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Brunner agrees with Barth that philosophical arguments are inadequate to serve as the basis for Christian belief.<sup>25</sup> All of these qualifications must be made for Brunner because of the limitations imposed by the pervasive effects of human sin.

We move now to a second alternative, Brunner’s characterization of the Roman Catholic view. Brunner believes that his assessment of the impact of sin on the powers of human reason separates his Reformed position from the Catholic view.<sup>26</sup> According to Brunner the Roman Catholic position divides the realms of faith and reason cleanly. Truths that can be known by the power of human reason are not made any less accessible by a noetic impact of sin. Natural theology is independent of revealed theology and may even provide the basis for grounding the claims or apparatus of faith. Here again Barth and Brunner agree. This view of natural theology must be opposed; though, we will see that Barth believes Brunner has misunderstood the Catholic position. They both strongly deny that the knowledge of God might have a prior foundation in philosophical argument or any other independent human grounding.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Brunner agrees with Barth’s objections to the *general starting-point assumption* and the *accessibility requirement*. With so much agreement, what then is the basis for Barth’s scathing disapprobation? The

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Voraussetzungen über Tragweite der Sünde gerade genommen und nur im Evangelium, in der *revelatio specialis* wiedergegeben”).

<sup>22</sup> “Nature and Grace,” 25 (*Natur und Gnade*, 12).

<sup>23</sup> “Nature and Grace,” 46 (*Natur und Gnade*, 32, “ein Vernunftsystem, das sich selbst genügt”).

<sup>24</sup> “Nature and Grace,” 27 (*Natur und Gnade*, 15, “die rechte natürliche Gotteserkenntnis hat nur der Christ, d. h. der Mensch, der zugleich in der Christusoffenbarung drinsteht”).

<sup>25</sup> “Nature and Grace,” 58 (*Natur und Gnade*, 43).

<sup>26</sup> “Nature and Grace,” 46 (*Natur und Gnade*, 32).

<sup>27</sup> Brunner denies that his eristic theology has anything to do with providing an external foundation for theology, and objects to what he takes to be the Roman Catholic enterprise of seeking philosophical proofs or foundations (“Nature and Grace,” 35 n14, 46; *Natur und Gnade*, 22 n1, 32).

difference between Barth and Brunner is not a difference over the noetic effects of sin, but rather a disagreement about wider human limitations with respect to the knowledge of God. We will expand on this as we now turn to a third alternative, Brunner's own position.

Brunner maintained that a genuine and relatively independent natural theology was possible, but only in the light of grace, which restores a natural sight once robbed by sin. Creation itself is endowed with a natural capacity to reflect the attributes of its Creator; and, human beings, as created in the image of God, have a natural capacity to apprehend the knowledge of God reflected in creation.<sup>28</sup> This human capacity for apprehension is obliterated by sin and restored by grace in Christ. But Brunner also stresses the importance of maintaining that, while capacities that comprise the *material* image of God are destroyed, the *formal* image of God is not destroyed by sin. The untouched *formal* image of God must remain intact to provide the "point of contact" for divine grace.<sup>29</sup> Unless sin were to destroy the human completely, it cannot take away the passive receptivity to divine address that human beings possess in virtue of being created in the image of God. In all of this, there is no material capacity or human contribution, so the principle of *sola gratia* is not violated. Brunner believes that a formal possibility must be affirmed if human beings are to remain responsible.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, this formal passive receptivity becomes the basis of a qualified negative apologetics Brunner calls *eristics*.<sup>31</sup>

Barth's sharp disagreement with Brunner is at root an objection to Brunner's positive assessment of human capacity on the basis of the unbroken *formal* image of God. Barth does not dispute the claim that a *formal* image of God remains intact in sinful humans.<sup>32</sup> But he rejects the suggestion that this entails any form of natural human capacity, receptivity or predisposition for revelation. "Man has completely lost the capacity for God."<sup>33</sup> No matter how passive, any human predisposition which might function to explain the possibility of receiving grace is seen by Barth as a human contribution and

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<sup>28</sup> "In every creation the spirit of the creator is in some way recognisable. The artist is known by all his works" ("Nature and Grace," 24; *Natur und Gnade*, 11, "Jedes Werk lobt seinen Meister").

<sup>29</sup> "Nature and Grace," 31 ("Anknüpfungspunkt", *Natur und Gnade*, 18).

<sup>30</sup> Emil Brunner, "Die Andere Aufgabe der Theologie," *Zwischen den Zeiten* 7 (1929): 273.

<sup>31</sup> "Nature and Grace," 59 (*Natur und Gnade*, 43, "Eristik").

<sup>32</sup> "In this formal sense the original image of God in man is not destroyed. Indeed not, we may well say. Even as a sinner man is man and not a tortoise" ("No!" 79; *Nein!*, 16).

<sup>33</sup> *CD* I.1, 238 (*KD* I.1, 251, "Das Vermögen für Gott ist dem Menschen . . . wirklich verloren gegangen").

therefore a violation of *sola gratia*.<sup>34</sup> He contends that Brunner's position is, in fact, much closer to the Roman Catholic view.

Barth correctly sees that Brunner's caricature of the Catholic conception of natural theology is "sadly distorted."<sup>35</sup> Brunner suggests that Roman Catholicism holds that the deliverances of human reason with respect to natural theology are unaffected by sin and are therefore not in need of a restoring grace. According to Brunner, what sets his position apart is its appeal to the prevenience of grace such that while natural theology is independent of revealed theology it is nevertheless subordinated to it. But, as Barth argues, in Roman Catholic theology "a true knowledge of God derived from reason and nature is *de facto* never attained without prevenient and preparatory grace."<sup>36</sup> The real Catholic position is very close to Brunner's and the outcome is similar as well—two sources of the knowledge of God, one delivered by human reason in contemplation of the imprint of the Creator on creation, the other delivered by faith, the supernatural self-revelation of God in Christ and through Scripture. Brunner believed that he had sufficiently distinguished his view from the Roman Catholic approach by objecting to philosophical proofs and the pursuit of an externally grounded rational basis for theology.<sup>37</sup> But this seems to assume that Catholic theology accepts the presuppositions of Enlightenment rationalism, even prior to the Enlightenment.<sup>38</sup> The Roman Catholic

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<sup>34</sup> This would be, in Trevor Hart's terms, the "smuggling in of a material sense" (*Regarding Karl Barth*, 171). Hart offers a helpful distinction between active and passive capacities, noting that in Barth's view, Brunner's formal/passive capacity has traces of the material/active sense (167-171).

<sup>35</sup> "No!" 95 (*Nein!*, 32, "eine arge Verzeichnung sei").

<sup>36</sup> "No!" 96 (*Nein!*, 32, "Erkenntnis Gottes aus Vernunft und Natur kommt als auf Grund der zuvorkommenden und vorbereitenden Gnade").

<sup>37</sup> "Nature and Grace," 58 (*Natur und Gnade*, 43).

<sup>38</sup> What Brunner gives us here is a common caricature of the Catholic attitude toward *fundamental* theology that has been helpfully questioned not least by Barth himself in his interpretation of Anselm's *Proslogion* 2–4 (*Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselms Beweis der Existenz Gottes im Zusammenhang Seines Theologischen Programms*, *Forschungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus*, Reihe 4, Bd. 3 [München: C. Kaiser, 1931], 76–199). For a clarification of the Catholic view see also Walter Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi*, *Glaubensbekenntnis der Kirche* 1 (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1982), ET: *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Eugene F. Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); and, Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Migration of Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New*



view agrees to the distinction between natural and revealed theology, but also agrees to the priority of revealed theology and the dependence on grace for each. As Walter Kasper helpfully clarifies, in Catholic thought, the possibility of natural theology is presupposed on the basis of revelation, and there is no natural capacity independent of grace.<sup>39</sup>

*Barth's Insistence on the Direct Action of God in All Revelation*

No matter how cautious or humble, any suggestion of a source of the knowledge of God outside of God's own activity of self-revelation cannot be countenanced on Barth's view. In Barth's view, this is what really separates him from Brunner and the Roman Catholic position. The impact of sin was not to disrupt an otherwise neutral and relatively independent created capacity either in nature to reflect the knowledge of God or in human beings to apprehend this reflection. The impact of sin was not to disrupt a 'natural' order instituted as an impersonal witness within the order of grace. The impact of sin was to disrupt fellowship with God, within which God's self-disclosure, enabling creatures to hear and creation to speak, was always given *supernaturally*. "Only retrospectively is it possible to reflect on the way in which he 'makes contact' with man, and this retrospect will ever be a retrospect upon a *miracle*."<sup>40</sup> It is not enough to stipulate that a natural knowledge of God is enabled by God indirectly by the 'infusion' of a capacity for independent discovery.<sup>41</sup> All revelation, no matter what its medium, to the extent that it is an enabling of a real knowledge of God, is a miraculous, supernatural gift. For this reason Barth rejects any strong division between two books or two types of revelation.<sup>42</sup> Geoffrey Bromiley has suggested that Barth's critique of natural theology should be differentiated from an objection to 'natural revelation.'<sup>43</sup> There is, however, every reason to think that Barth strongly resists the notion of *natural* revelation. While Barth may allow that it is proper to creation to serve as a witness in the supernatural miracle of divine self-revelation, it is not a property of creation so to serve. Consequently, the

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*Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>39</sup> *Der Gott Jesu Christi*, 70–77.

<sup>40</sup> "No!" 121 (*Nein!*, 56).

<sup>41</sup> *CD I/1*, 216 (*KD I/1*, 226, "eingeflößte Möglichkeit").

<sup>42</sup> *CD III/1*, 414 (*KD III/1*, 476).

<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey Bromiley, "Karl Barth," in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 55.

provision of a natural revelation, independent of the domain of supernatural revelation is rejected on the same grounds as Barth's rejection of natural theology. Critical to understanding Barth's objection is seeing that, in his view, revelation cannot be revelation unless it is an instance of direct divine self-disclosure.<sup>44</sup>

But why is Barth so unflinching about the direct action of God in revelation? Why not think that God has endowed human beings with a faculty, we might call it the *sensus divinitatis*, which can operate in relative independence from the direct action of the Holy Spirit? Why not think that when this faculty is regenerated and functioning properly it can lead us to a real knowledge of God purely from a consideration of creation, which God has similarly endowed with a capacity to witness to God in relative independence from the work of the Spirit? To get to the heart of what is motivating Barth's position we need only return to what we have already established in the first two chapters regarding Barth's theology of revelation, starting with Barth's rejection of the *general stating-point assumption*—his resistance to grounding a theology of revelation in any *a priori* claims about revelation.

Barth intends his dogmatics to be a reflection on the one *a priori* event of revelation itself. Barth's *theo-foundationalism* eschews any anthropological bases or foundational philosophical assumptions. The only foundation is the one God himself establishes in his divine self-disclosure. This is an approach which is quite like Plantinga's own *particularism*, working inductively from what has already been made known.<sup>45</sup> In fact, *particularism*, is the term George Hunsinger adopts to indicate Barth's strictly inductive approach. Hunsinger maintains that Barth's particularism is a key motivator for Barth's rejection of natural theology.<sup>46</sup> This is not to suggest that particularism itself is for Barth

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<sup>44</sup> Ronald Thiemann worries that Barth's instance on the disjunction between creaturely medium and divine revelation, and "taking refuge in the miracle of grace," undermines the trustworthiness of the medium. "Christian faith demands that once God has claimed a piece of creaturely reality as his own and bound himself to it, then we are warranted in accepting the God-forged link between the human and divine" (*Revelation and Theology*, 95). Thiemann fails to grasp Barth's critical insight. Creaturely mediums are unable (*non capax*) to reveal God on their own. They are, therefore, always inadequate in themselves as a basis for grounding belief. There is no authority of Scripture *per se*, only the secure authority of the Word of God communicating through the form—He is the church's one foundation.

<sup>45</sup> See the discussion in chapter 4. Plantinga does not begin with a general criteria for proper basicity, but with instances of knowledge already known and held in the basic way.

<sup>46</sup> Hunsinger also quite rightly finds that natural theology is in conflict with what he has identified as the Barthian motifs of *actualism* and *objectivism*. In Barth's eyes, all of these motifs unfold from the

an *a priori* methodological assumption.<sup>47</sup> Hunsinger is quite clear that the Barthian motifs he identifies are not *a priori* philosophical principles or foundational commitments, rather, they are to be taken as forms of thought arising out of or “implicit in” the event of revelation itself.<sup>48</sup> In other words, Barth is not guilty of adopting particularism as a *general* principle. Instead, his particularism describes the realization, in the light of divine self-revelation, that the creator who is making himself known is truly *sui generis*, utterly transcending the created media of revelation. His particularism is motivated by an encounter with the uniqueness of the one doing the self-revealing. He writes: “A result of the uniqueness of this object of knowledge might well be that the concept of its knowledge cannot be definitively measured by the concept of the knowledge of other objects or by a general concept of knowledge but that it can be defined at all only in terms of its own object.”<sup>49</sup> The uniqueness of God creates a problem for any revelation that moves from creation to Creator. In fact, the uniqueness of God is problematic for revelation in general.<sup>50</sup>

This problem is often discussed as a problem of theological reference,<sup>51</sup> or the problem of the inadequacy of human language and concepts for the knowledge of God.<sup>52</sup> For

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foundation that God himself establishes in his self-revelation (George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], 96–99).

<sup>47</sup> T. F. Torrance notes the interesting parallels between what we have called Barth’s particularism and what he calls “*a posteriori* science.” We should be careful, however, not to think that an analogy to science provides Barth a basis for or a validation of the way in which he proceeds theologically. It is potentially misleading, therefore, to conclude that “Barth’s exclusion of natural theology is seen to rest on the two-fold ground of theological content and scientific method.” The only ground for the knowledge of God, as Torrance thoroughly affirms, is “its objective ground in God himself” (“The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth,” 128).

<sup>48</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 29–30.

<sup>49</sup> CD I/1, 190 (KD I/1, 198, “Es könnte sich ja aus der Eigenart dieses Erkenntnisgegenstandes ergeben, daß der Begriff seiner Erkenntnis durchaus nicht ultimativ an dem Begriff der Erkenntnis anderer Gegenstände, an einem allgemeinen Erkenntnisbegriff gemessen werden darf, sondern daß er sich überhaupt nur von diesem seinem Gegenstand her bestimmen läßt”).

<sup>50</sup> This amplifies the problem Kierkegaard engages at the beginning of the *Fragments*. If, in ignorance of the truth we lack also the condition for recognizing the truth, how can truth be learned? *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 9–22.

<sup>51</sup> See Aquinas’ famous treatment of the names of God (*Summa Theologica*, I.13).

<sup>52</sup> Plantinga addresses a version of this problem in the first chapter of *WCB*.

Brunner, the solution seems to be found in the *imago Dei* as the point of contact for human beings.<sup>53</sup> Barth believed that the Roman Catholic solution was based on an *analogia entis*.<sup>54</sup> In the development of Barth's own thought he wrestles with the fact that the God who makes himself known is known to be so independent and transcendent as to cast doubt on a genuine human possibility of knowing him.<sup>55</sup> In order to preserve the revealed truth of God's freedom and uniqueness, Barth concludes that not just the knowledge of God, but all conditions for the possibility of the knowledge of God must come from outside creation, from God alone. God himself provides, indeed is, the possibility of his own knowability. "Man must be set aside and God himself presented as the original subject, as the primary power, as the creator of the possibility of knowledge of God's Word."<sup>56</sup> More specifically, as we saw in chapter 1, Barth's solution takes shape within his doctrine of the Trinity. The problem of the possibility of human reception of divine revelation—the subjective appropriation of revelation—is overcome in that God is his own revealedness. God is both the object and, as the Spirit, the subject of his revealing. The Revealer and revealing act are one with the success of that act. This does not spiritualize revelation in such a way that it ceases to be creaturely knowledge or such that creaturely mediation becomes irrelevant. Barth is, instead, insisting that the possibility of genuine human knowing is the gift of our participation in Christ by the ministry of the Spirit.<sup>57</sup> Creaturely mediation remains without a betrayal of God's radical

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<sup>53</sup> Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 31 (*Natur und Gnade*, 18, "Anknüpfungspunkt").

<sup>54</sup> CD I/1, xiii (*KD I/1*, viii). We will take a closer look at the problem of analogical predication in the next chapter.

<sup>55</sup> Helpful treatments of Barth's development from *Der Römerbrief* on the issue of the possibility of revelation include: Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung Seiner Theologie*; McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 241–374; and, Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Die Subjektivität Gottes und Die Trinitätslehre: Ein Beitrag zur Beziehung Zwischen Karl Barth und Der Philosophie Hegels," in *Grundfragen Systematischer Theologie: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 96–98.

<sup>56</sup> CD I/1, 247 (*KD I/1*, 260, "als das ursprüngliche Subjekt, als der primär Mächtige, als der die Möglichkeit der Erkenntnis des Wortes Gottes Schaffende der Mensch abzusetzen und Gott selbst einzusetzen ist").

<sup>57</sup> Here once again we should emphasize that while the doctrine of the Trinity is at the heart of Barth's solution to the freedom of God in his revelation, this does not mean that the *doctrine* of the Trinity is the fundamental presupposition upon which Barth deduces his theology of revelation. God is the ground for our knowledge of God. It is not that a doctrine or presupposition about God is the ground for Barth's conception of revelation. It is in this light that we should understand Pannenberg's conclusion that, "die

uniqueness.<sup>58</sup> Though the power to mediate divine revelation is not a capacity inherent in or transferred to creaturely media, nevertheless, through the gift of faith,<sup>59</sup> creaturely media serve as the vehicles of divine communication. As Barth says, “the power of this reference does not lie in itself; it lies in that to which it refers.”<sup>60</sup>

We can conclude that Barth’s unflagging insistence on the direct action of God in revelation and his resistance to any creaturely capacities for the knowledge of God fundamentally stem from two reflections on the event of God’s self-revelation. The first is that God is really, genuinely, humanly and cognitively known in his revelation. The second reflection is that the God we meet in God’s self-revelation is so utterly unique that no creaturely phenomenon could explain the possibility of his being humanly known. The only solution which can uncompromisingly maintain both affirmations is one where the possibility for real human knowing of God is in no way given over to or implanted in creation. This explains Barth’s disagreement with Brunner and his rejection of any form of natural theology that might compromise God’s freedom and transcendence by implying that the source and power of the revelation of God could be anything other than God himself. This also begins to explain the bluntness and urgency of Barth’s response.<sup>61</sup> Barth saw that the consequences of a compromise of God’s freedom and transcendence in his revelation would be disastrous. The inevitable outcome of a conceiving of God from human ideas rather than from the givenness of revelation was a loss of the knowledge of God altogether and a fulfillment of the suspicions of Feuerbach. Such a move would be

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immanente Trinität ist somit der Grundstein für Barths Konzeption der Selbständigkeit Gottes in seiner Offenbarung” (“Die Subjectivität Gottes und Die Trinitätslehre,” 98.)

<sup>58</sup> See Bruce McCormack’s enlightening exposition of Barth’s discovery of this affirmation with respect to the incarnation accomplished in the *anhypostatic-enhyypostatic* Christological dogma (*Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 325–463).

<sup>59</sup> Instead of an *analogia entis*, Barth suggests an *analogia fidei* in which our knowledge of God is in our being known by God. “It is the divine act of knowledge which takes place on man rather than through man that distinguishes those whose knowledge is grounded in love of God and therefore in true fellowship with Him, in the presence of God” (*CD* I/1, 244; *KD* I/1, 257). We will take a closer look at Barth’s *analogia fidei* in the next chapter.

<sup>60</sup> *CD* I/1, 197 (*KD* I/1, 205, “Die Kraft dieses Verweises liegt nicht in ihm selber, sondern in dem, worauf er verweist”).

<sup>61</sup> John Webster describes Barth’s response to Brunner as “rude” and “rather savage” (“Introducing Barth,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John B. Webster [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 6).

“the end of all, yes, *all* certainty.”<sup>62</sup> Granted, the particular historical situation out of which Barth was writing highlighted these dire consequences,<sup>63</sup> but it is quite unlikely that Barth imagined a situation in which opposing this error was anything less than imperative for a theologian of the church.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, God’s direct action is always essential to revelation because, “revelation in fact does not differ from the person of Jesus Christ nor from the reconciliation accomplished in Him.”<sup>65</sup> God is who he is, and is known to be who he is, in his action of drawing us into relationship with him by the person and work of Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Spirit.<sup>66</sup> There cannot be a knowledge of God that is not incorporated into this activity of transforming grace. This is what we find at the heart of Barth’s objection to natural theology. It seems that in Barth’s view all natural theology, including Brunner’s qualified endorsement, is guilty of conceiving of a knowledge of God derived by human beings independent of direct active encounter with the sovereign, triune God who by his own revelation overcomes all barriers to revelation.

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<sup>62</sup> CD I/1, 216 (KD I/1, 226, “das Ende aller, aber auch aller Sicherheit”).

<sup>63</sup> T. F. Torrance maintains that Barth’s contemporary situation “explains why Barth was so angry with Emil Brunner’s mediating pamphlet ‘Nature and Grace’, for to those fighting the battle of resistance in Germany it appeared to fortify the basis on which the so-called ‘German Christians’ were advocating conciliation with the Nazi régime” (“The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth,” 125).

<sup>64</sup> We should not take as a retraction, Barth’s 1966 message to Brunner stating that he no longer felt he needed to say ‘No.’ Nor should we see this as an indication that the historical situation no longer necessitated a strong opposition to the notion of an independent, though restored by grace, natural capacity for revelation. Brunner was on his death bed, and Barth simply wanted to emphasize God’s gracious ‘Yes’ to humanity as the source of life. “. . .sagen Sie ihn *doch ja*, die Zeit da ich meinte, ihm ein ‘Nein!’ entgegenrufen zu müssen, sei längst vorüber, wo wir doch alle nur davon leben, daß ein großer un barmherziger Gott zu uns allen sein gnädiges Ja sagt” (*Karl Barth - Emil Brunner Briefwechsel 1916–1966*, ed. Eberhard Busch, Gesamtausgabe, V [Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2000], 391).

<sup>65</sup> CD I/1, 119 (KD I/1, 122, “Offenbarung ist ja auch nicht verschieden von der Person Jesu Christi und wiederum nicht verschieden von der in ihm geschehenen Versöhnung”).

<sup>66</sup> This seems to be what Hunsinger has in mind in his identification of Barth’s ‘actualism’ as an important motif in shaping Barth’s attitude toward natural theology (*How to Read Karl Barth*, 96–99).

*Assessment of Barth on Natural Theology*

It is safe to conclude that the fundamental difference between Barth and Brunner is not over their estimation of the noetic effects of sin, or the perseverance of a formal *imago Dei*, or even the possibility that creation and culture might be used in the service of divine self-revelation. What Barth rejects is a general revelation unrelated to God's encountering us in Jesus Christ by the ministry of the Spirit. This does not entail that creation and culture cannot serve as media of divine revelation, whereby encounter with Jesus is actualized by God. For Barth it is possible to know God by his effects, but not *merely* by his effects. Even knowing God by his effects requires God's immediate act. What this does entail is either an eradication or a heavy blurring of the distinction between general or natural revelation and special or supernatural revelation. Barth emphatically denounces the separation of nature and grace into two books of revelation.<sup>67</sup> All revelation, whether through reflection on the cosmos or by means of the testimony of prophets and apostles is an activity of divine grace, and more specifically a gracious encounter with Jesus Christ by the transformative work of the Spirit.

Barth's position can be clarified further by distinguishing it from other options with respect to two considerations frequently operative in stronger demarcations between special and general revelation—namely, the availability of revelation and the kind of grace active in revelation. Starting with the question of the availability of revelation, we saw in chapter 4 that Plantinga follows Aquinas and Calvin in affirming some kind of innate capacity for a rudimentary knowledge of God activated in the presence of triggering conditions that might include an inward or outward experience of created existence. This is a *natural* knowledge in that the human cognitive equipment involved is part of the original design plan. We might continue to follow Calvin and suggest that this is a universal knowledge, in that the original design plan expresses an intention for every human being.<sup>68</sup> Barth is willing to go along up to a point. In his exposition of Romans 1:18ff, Barth grants that "It is unquestionable that knowledge of God is here ascribed to man in the cosmos, and knowability is ascribed to God."<sup>69</sup> For Barth, however, the very

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<sup>67</sup> Barth rejects what he calls the "dual system of book-keeping" (*CD* III/1, 414; *KD* III/1, 476, "doppelte Buchführung").

<sup>68</sup> *Institutes*, I. ii–v.

<sup>69</sup> *CD* II/1, 119 (*KD* II/1, 131, "Zweifelloos wird damit dem Menschen im Kosmos Erkenntnis Gottes und damit Gott Erkennbarkeit zugeschrieben").

rubric of ‘universally available’ knowledge is perilously misleading. The knowledge of God is never like a cache of information deposited either in human nature or in the created order, as if it were a substance at our disposal that could be mined and acquired. Knowledge of God, no matter how rudimentary, in order to qualify as knowledge of the true God is personal, freely given, trinitarian self-disclosure. So Barth quickly adds, “There can be no doubt that Paul meant by this the revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.”<sup>70</sup> Edward Adams argues convincingly that for Calvin even the universal, natural knowledge of God is *revealed* knowledge. Though Calvin speaks of an implanted knowledge of God, “it does not come to human beings, nor do human beings come to it, apart from God’s action but as a direct consequence of divine initiative.”<sup>71</sup> This is patently the case for Barth, who (also like Calvin) would for this reason never speak of a knowledge of God arising from a natural ‘capacity.’ The fact that it is part of the original designed intention for human beings to come to know God in no way changes Barth’s conviction that genuine knowledge of God involves the essential enabling action of the Spirit. This takes us to the second consideration—regarding kinds of grace.

It should be obvious that for Barth, if there is no knowledge of God outside of active divine self-revelation, there is no natural knowledge of God independent of grace. Merely recognizing the necessity of grace for knowledge of God does not, however, distinguish Barth’s view. Without further definition, an insistence on *grace* might only amount to what Henri de Lubac calls the rejection of the hypothesis of ‘pure nature,’<sup>72</sup> a relatively modest claim regarding the dependence of nature on divine sustaining. In this regard, Aquinas grants that “for the knowledge of any truth whatsoever man needs divine help, that the intellect may be moved by God to its act.”<sup>73</sup> Aquinas grants this pervasive divine activity which upholds and moves our natures, but distinguishes it from the activity of *sanctifying grace* which adds something to our nature thereby enabling a knowledge

<sup>70</sup> CD II/1, 119 (KD II/1, 131, “Es kann kein Zweifel sein, daß Paulus damit die Offenbarung der Gnade Gottes in Jesus Christus gemeint hat”).

<sup>71</sup> Edward Adams, “Calvin’s View of Natural Knowledge of God,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 3 (2001): 281–282. See also T.H.L. Parker, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: a Study in the Theology of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1952); and the dissenting view of Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).

<sup>72</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London: G. Chapman, 1967), 50ff.

<sup>73</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 109, a. 1.



which surpasses what can be known by natural light. Some later reformed thought observes a similar distinction, articulated as the difference between *common grace* and *special* or *saving grace*. Common grace, which accounts for general revelation, is a divine work that exerts a rational or moral influence but “leaves the heart unchanged.”<sup>74</sup> For Barth, none of this will do. Genuine knowledge of God involves personal encounter with God which cannot leave us unchanged. Revelation is both personal and transformative in a way that defies a clean separation of mind, heart and life. In other words, revelation requires the gift of faith to be received. Barth’s dictum that “it is faith that hears, understands and obeys God’s speech”<sup>75</sup> applies equally to all of God’s speech, whether the medium is Scripture or the starry heavens. For this reason, with respect to the gift of revelation, there can be no division of God’s grace into kinds.

In conclusion, Barth’s rejection of natural theology is required by his understanding of revelation and should be understood only as a rejection of the possibility of a genuine knowledge of God outside of active, triune self-disclosure through gracious, personal and transformative encounter with Jesus Christ by the ministry of the Spirit. If there is room for a properly construed and constrained *theologia naturalis*, as Barth himself suggests, it will be “included and brought into clear light”<sup>76</sup> in the theology of revelation. Barth’s position is not, in fact, as extreme as it is sometimes thought to be. There is no denial in his view of the significance of human cognition and reasoning in the reception of revelation, nor of the possibility that the created order or our general experience as creatures might indeed serve as a witness to the creator. Barth is merely denying that created human capacities, even once renewed from the deleterious effects of sin, are ever in and of themselves sufficient to attain genuine knowledge of God. Vigilance here is required, not only for German Christians in 1934, but wherever the church is tempted toward the inevitable idolatry which results from seeking a way to the knowledge of God which is other than God’s way to us. To choose to begin elsewhere constitutes disobedience and a *de facto* rejection of God’s self-disclosure. General revelation and natural theology are not dismissed, only their

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<sup>74</sup> By contrast, special grace is “spiritual and re-creative” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], 437).

<sup>75</sup> CD I/1, 135 (KD I/1, 140, “es ist der Glaube, der die Rede Gottes hört, versteht und ihr gehorcht”).

<sup>76</sup> “Church and Culture,” 342 (“Die Kirche und die Kultur,” 22, “mit enthalten und ans Licht gebracht”).

illusory status as independent of ‘special’ divine action.<sup>77</sup> If there is a *sensus divinitatis* it operates within the realm of the action of the Holy Spirit.

Having seen ourselves clear of several misconceptions of Barth’s position and having ventured a clarification of his core concerns, we are now ready to look at Plantinga’s thoughts about natural theology in order to determine the extent and seriousness of his disagreement with Barth. But before we do, it is worth acknowledging two areas for further investigation that bear upon the discussion of natural theology, but which we have here left untouched. The first has to do with my use of ‘genuine’ to qualify ‘the knowledge of God,’ which invites a question as to the meaningfulness of such a qualification. Could there be a knowledge of God that was in some sense fittingly referred to as *knowledge* that was at the same time *not* genuine? I have employed the qualification here to signal that more work needs to be done to specify just what qualifies as knowledge of God for Barth and Plantinga. The second area for further investigation is intimately related to the first. It has to do with the nature of faith, which I have noted plays an essential noetic role in Barth’s theology of revelation. Faith and the knowledge of God will occupy our attention in the next chapter. Both of these questions are raised by an obvious difficulty for Barth’s position—namely, that it certainly seems that some who do not have Christian faith still possess at minimum a rudimentary knowledge of God.<sup>78</sup> The discussion of natural theology tees-up these questions nicely; and, until they are addressed, the conclusions of this chapter will remain provisional.

## **Part II: Plantinga on Natural Theology**

One of Alvin Plantinga’s consistent objectives in the epistemology of religious belief has been to defend the possibility that accepting belief in God without an argument may be a perfectly rational and sensible thing to do. In the early days of his development of what would later be known as ‘Reformed Epistemology,’ one way in which Plantinga advanced his argument was by looking at what he termed ‘the Reformed Objection to Natural Theology.’ In its first published form Plantinga examined the positions taken by

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<sup>77</sup> As we have already pointed out, mere divine sustaining of the natural capacities is not enough. For Barth, the grace of revelation can never be taken to be an unspiritual, semi-automated process in which God remains personally distant and we remain unchanged.

<sup>78</sup> The question is pressed further by examples in Scripture, not least the notion that even the demons have some knowledge of God (Jas 2:19).

Herman Bavinck and John Calvin,<sup>79</sup> but when he incorporated it into his truly seminal essay, *Reason and Belief in God*, it was expanded to include a treatment of ‘the Barthian dilemma.’<sup>80</sup> For our purposes, we will first attempt to establish Plantinga’s position with respect to natural theology, and then turn to the connection with Barth.

### *The Natural Theology that Plantinga Rejects*

The *natural theology* Plantinga considers—under that name—is much more narrowly defined than the natural theology debated by Barth and Brunner. Plantinga uses the term to identify strictly “the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God.”<sup>81</sup> He does not, for instance, extend the definition to the possibility of arriving at a knowledge of God by the application of our ‘natural’ faculties. Given this narrow definition, it is accurate to say that a central thrust of Plantinga’s work has been to attack the notion of the *necessity* of natural theology for belief in God.<sup>82</sup> The non-necessity of natural theology is a corollary of his rejection of Cliffordian evidentialism and his defense of the proper basicity of theistic belief. Plantinga clearly sees himself in line with a tradition of Reformed thought on this point. He does not stop here, however, nor does the tradition with which he finds himself aligned. Natural theology is not only unnecessary for belief in God, there is also something fundamentally *improper* about it.<sup>83</sup>

As we noted in the previous chapter, according to Plantinga, “If Christian beliefs are true, then the standard and most satisfactory way to hold them will not be as the

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<sup>79</sup> “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” in *Philosophical Knowledge* (Washington, DC: American Catholic Philosophical Assoc, 1980), 49–53.

<sup>80</sup> *RGB*, 68–71. Unfortunately, this is the only point in Plantinga’s corpus where he engages in any detail the thought of Karl Barth.

<sup>81</sup> *RGB*, 63; and, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” 49

<sup>82</sup> In Philip Quinn’s debate with Plantinga, he identifies the need for natural theology as the issue of deepest disagreement between them. “A great deal hangs on the fate of natural theology” (“The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga,” in *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, ed. Linda Zagzebski [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993], 162).

<sup>83</sup> Plantinga would disagree sharply with Norman Kretzmann’s assertion that, “natural theology still offers the best route by which philosophers can, as philosophers, approach theological propositions” (*The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas’s Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997], 22).

conclusions of argument.”<sup>84</sup> The impropriety of natural theology is its suggestion that rational inference from more certain, antecedently held beliefs provides the best foundation, not only for full-fledged Christian belief, but even for brute theism. Plantinga argues for the definitive superiority of a ‘testimonial model.’<sup>85</sup> It is not rational inference, but the testimony of God the Spirit which is the truly adequate and stable source of warrant for belief. He cites a conclusion Calvin reaches in Calvin’s discussion of the proper basis for accepting the authority of Scripture: “we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.”<sup>86</sup> While Calvin is directly addressing the authority of Scripture, Plantinga contends that the same holds true for belief in God’s existence.<sup>87</sup> But what is it about the arguments of natural theology that make them unfitting grounds for belief in God?

Plantinga seems to have two responses to this question, both of which suggest that stable belief requires a degree of warrant that is not delivered by human arguments. At some points, Plantinga simply says that he has never come across an argument for Christian or generally theistic belief that confers a degree of warrant sufficient for knowledge and strong conviction.<sup>88</sup> But at other points he seems willing to suggest that such arguments are inherently inadequate.<sup>89</sup> In the last chapter we saw that on Plantinga’s model, properly basic beliefs hold a stronger position than the non-basic beliefs inferred from them. He argues that a probabilistic argument from public evidence and historical

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<sup>84</sup> WCB, 201.

<sup>85</sup> WCB, 255–268.

<sup>86</sup> “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” 53; RGB, 67; and, WCB, 267; quoting John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) I, vii, 4, p. 79.

<sup>87</sup> I am deliberately postponing for now the question of the role of the Spirit in belief formation involving the *sensus divinitatis*.

<sup>88</sup> E.g., “I don’t know of good philosophical arguments for the claim that Christian belief is true (and I don’t know of conclusive philosophical arguments for the claim that theism is true)” (“Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments For Christian Belief,” *Philosophia Christi* 3, no. 2 [2001]: 387). Or, “I don’t know of an argument for Christian belief that seems very likely to convince one who doesn’t already accept its conclusion” (WCB, 201). In *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga concludes that there are no noncircular arguments or evidence to support belief either for or against God.

<sup>89</sup> Arguments cannot deliver the kind of firm conviction that comes when belief is warranted in the basic way. “. . .they have (or can have) much more firmness and stability than they could sensibly have if accepted on the basis of rational argument” (WCB, 264).

investigation could never produce warranted belief in either the existence of God or the ‘great things of the gospel.’ For Plantinga, the only adequate source of warrant for these beliefs exceeds the capacities of the arguments of natural theology and involves directly the design and action of God.

If it’s to be the case that at least some people actually know some of the claims of Christianity, or even are rational in actually believing them, there will have to be a separate source of warrant for such belief, something like, following Calvin and Aquinas, the internal testimony (Calvin) or instigation (Aquinas) of the Holy Spirit.<sup>90</sup>

So, for Plantinga, the rejection of natural theology is a recognition that human arguments are neither necessary nor sufficient for theistic or Christian belief. As we mentioned in chapters 3 and 4, however, the arguments of natural theology retain, in Plantinga’s view, considerable value.

#### *Plantinga’s Role for Arguments and Inference*

Plantinga emphatically denies the charge that he considers efforts to develop arguments for Christian belief to be “wrongheaded and inconsequential.”<sup>91</sup> On the contrary, he maintains that such arguments “can be of use in many different and important ways.”<sup>92</sup> In order to see the value of the arguments of natural theology for Plantinga we will need to relax his above-cited definition of *natural theology*. The proper function of the arguments of natural theology is not to *prove* or *demonstrate* God’s existence; nevertheless, such arguments can *assist* belief. For Plantinga, this assistance may be apologetical—assisting unbelievers in *attaining* belief, or pastoral—assisting believers in *sustaining* belief. In either case, arguments may be used by God to boost the positive epistemic status of belief or to neutralize and dispel doubt and defeat. In our treatment of Plantinga’s position, we will look first at the pastoral role of natural theological arguments and then turn to their apologetical function.

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<sup>90</sup> “Rationality and Public Evidence: a Reply to Richard Swinburne,” *Religious Studies* 37 (2001): 221.

<sup>91</sup> R. Douglas Geivett and Greg Jesson, “Plantinga’s Externalism and the Terminus of Warrant-Based Epistemology,” *Philosophia Christi* 3, no. 2 (2001): 338.

<sup>92</sup> “Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments For Christian Belief,” 384–385.

Plantinga believes that rational arguments, which draw conclusions by inference from other beliefs, may be useful for those who have already arrived at theistic or Christian belief. That the arguments of natural theology might serve a pastoral role in the life of the believer is a possibility created by the reality that human faith has not yet been made perfect. Like Barth, Plantinga recognizes that our faith finds itself in tension to some degree with our unbelief.<sup>93</sup> For Barth, our proper attitude is that of the father in Mark chapter 9 who cries out to Jesus, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”<sup>94</sup> In Plantinga’s view, help from the Lord may come in the form of an argument which “can help dispel the doubt.”<sup>95</sup> The idea here seems to be that at points when faith is waning an argument for the reasonableness of faith in light of other beliefs may help to prop-up faith. Clearly, for Plantinga, Christian or theistic belief should not require the support of argument. Arguments only serve this purpose under less than optimal conditions, namely, when faith is in a weakened state.

Plantinga’s thought diverges from Aquinas in an important way at this point. Plantinga repeatedly distinguishes his understanding of the relationship between faith and reason, or philosophy and theology, as Augustinian rather than Thomist.<sup>96</sup> At the heart of this distinction is the assertion that, for the Thomist, taking something by faith is epistemically inferior to knowing it by reason.<sup>97</sup> The knowledge of faith is indirect,

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<sup>93</sup> Plantinga defers to Calvin, “in the believing mind certainty is mixed with doubt” (“Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” in *Christian Philosophy at the Close of the Twentieth Century: Assessment and Perspective*, eds. Sander Griffioen and Bert M. Balk [Kampen, Netherlands: Uitgeverij Kok, 1995], 40, quoting John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960] III, ii, 18, p. 564). See also *WCB*, 260n35, 264n43.

<sup>94</sup> *CD* I/1, 24 (*KD* I/1, 23). He also writes, “Even and precisely in the depths of unbelief faith hears the new summons to faith” (*CD* I/1, 255; *KD* I/1, 269).

<sup>95</sup> “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 40.

<sup>96</sup> See “Augustinian Christian Philosophy,” *The Monist* 75, no. 3 (1992): 316–320; “On Christian Scholarship,” in *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, ed. Theodore Hesburgh (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 157–159; and, “Faith & Reason: A Response to Pope John Paul II’s Encyclical Letter, *Fides et Ratio*,” *Books and Culture* 5, no. 4 (1999): 29–31.

<sup>97</sup> The *locus classicus* for this in Aquinas is *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12. Here we find that faith’s advantages over reason have to do with the limitations of reason. Knowledge by faith, however, is without intellectual vision and therefore lacks real understanding. Knowledge of God’s essence is not available in this mortal life, but awaits the beatific vision which surpasses faith because it is a direct seeing.

requiring an act of the will trusting in testimony, rather than the direct apprehension (*scientia*) provided by the light of reason. “Hence the knowledge of faith is more like hearing than seeing.”<sup>98</sup> Plantinga rejects this Thomist characterization of faith and knowledge, and recommends instead an ‘Augustinian’ view. On this view, knowing something by way of testimony is not necessarily inferior to knowing something by way of deductive argument. Thinking back to Plantinga’s general model for how beliefs may have warrant, key conditions like design plan, truth orientation, environmental aptness and proper function are consistent across a number of different ‘faculties.’ There is nothing on Plantinga’s model to support the Thomist class distinction between testimony and demonstration. In fact, as Plantinga argues, there are many objects of knowing that are better known by testimony than by any other means (e.g., the speed of light, or one’s own name). The knowledge of God is a prime example. Genuine knowledge of God cannot be arrived at by reasoning alone, but requires God’s self-revealing design and action. In the case of God, therefore, hearing is better than seeing—or we might even say that hearing is a better seeing than that afforded by otherwise unassisted human intellectual vision.

Plantinga unflinchingly maintains that the arguments of natural theology are neither necessary nor sufficient for Christian or theistic belief. How is it then that on Plantinga’s account of warrant, in times of weakened faith, such arguments may serve to assist belief and dispel doubt? Nowhere are we given a detailed answer;<sup>99</sup> however, Plantinga does suggest that the warrant for a single belief could come from multiple sources which together boost warrant to a level required for knowledge.<sup>100</sup> This affords an opportunity for the arguments of natural theology to play a positive role. In the previous chapter we saw that the impact of sin on cognitive environments and proper function may distort and attenuate doxastic experience and belief formation based on either the *sensus divinitatis* or the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IIHS). The impact may diminish warrant to such a degree that it is no longer sufficient for knowledge. In this situation the warrant boost of a probabilistic or evidential natural theological argument may be such that

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<sup>98</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IIIa, 40, 3.

<sup>99</sup> Graham Oppy laments that Plantinga leaves the faith-bolstering role of arguments “seriously underdeveloped” (“Natural Theology,” in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Deane-Peter Baker [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 43).

<sup>100</sup> See “The Prospects for Natural Theology,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 311–312.

together with the deliverances of faith, “the combination of the two sources *is* sufficient for knowledge.”<sup>101</sup>

We entered this discussion focused on the pastoral role of arguments, but the dynamics of the relationship between the deliverances of reason and the deliverances of faith are similar for the apologetical role. For the believer in the throes of doubt, struggling to maintain conviction in what once seemed more certain, arguments may be useful in either neutralizing or overwhelming doubt. Doubt may come because of specific *defeating* doubts, and/or it may indicate the weakening of the deliverances of faith.<sup>102</sup> The arguments of natural theology may serve to defeat doubt directly and/or strengthen belief formation. The same is the case for the *unbeliever* whose warrant for belief is disrupted by defeaters and/or weakened by the noetic impact of sin.<sup>103</sup> The apologetical role of the arguments of natural theology will take either a negative role in the defeating of defeaters, or a positive role in overwhelming defeaters (intrinsic defeater-defeaters) or in boosting warrant for belief in combination with the *sensus divinitatis* or IHS.<sup>104</sup> Understood in this way, Plantinga is open to the usefulness of both negative and positive apologetics.<sup>105</sup>

Nonetheless, many of Plantinga’s interlocutors have wanted to see a greater stress in Plantinga’s work on the value of and need for the arguments of natural theology.<sup>106</sup> Plantinga’s primary objective has been to show that theistic and Christian belief may be

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<sup>101</sup> “Reply,” *Philosophical Books* 43, no. 2 (2002): 127–128. Plantinga is even willing to suggest that these two sources together may provide an “excess of warrant.” Perhaps this is how we are to understand Plantinga’s frequent suggestion that the arguments of natural theology may serve as *confirmations*. In the light of faith such arguments are not only more convincing, but actually confer an excess of warrant.

<sup>102</sup> I am not suggesting a weakening in what is offered by the Spirit, but a weakening in its appropriation in the human knower.

<sup>103</sup> The noetic impact of sin, it should be remembered, is not confined to noetic degradation due to the personal rebellion of the knower in question, but also includes a much broader form of noetic degradation due to brokenness in human relationships, thought forms and communication.

<sup>104</sup> For Plantinga’s thoughts on negative and positive apologetics, see “Augustinian Christian Philosophy,” 292–296; and, “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 37–40.

<sup>105</sup> Michael Sudduth is right to conclude that, “Plantinga’s criticisms of theistic arguments should not be construed as undermining positive apologetics, but rather as shaping it in a constructively critical manner” (“Reformed Epistemology and Christian Apologetics,” *Religious Studies* 39 [2003]: 316).

<sup>106</sup> E.g., “I can’t help but agree with David Basinger and the many critics of Reformed epistemology who echo his position, that the Christian has a duty to at least *attempt* to offer a positive apologetic for her beliefs” (Deane-Peter Baker, “Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology: What’s the Question?,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 57 [2005]: 100).



properly basic with no assistance from inferential reasoning. Some of Plantinga's more sympathetic objectors, however, while not disagreeing with Plantinga's main point, have been strongly critical of how understated the value of argument seems to be in Plantinga's models. Philip Quinn and James Beilby seem to agree that, for many people living in the world today, theistic or Christian belief does require the assistance of argument to defeat defeaters and/or boost warrant.<sup>107</sup> In chapter 4, I addressed the objection that Plantinga's *no-defeater condition* leaves belief in need of support from arguments thereby undermining its basicity. There I argued that the employment of defeater-defeaters, which is the enterprise of negative apologetics, does not undermine basicity because the arguments do not lend anything themselves positively to warrant. Instead, negative apologetical arguments work to remove obstructions to the flow of warrant. Surely, though, the same cannot be said for positive apologetics or the kind of arguments that might serve cooperatively to boost warrant when human appropriation of the deliverances of faith are attenuated by the personal and environmental, cognitive impact of sin. In these cases, theistic or Christian belief is no longer purely basic. We will return to this in a moment in discussion with Barth where I will make an irenic proposal for how best to understand Plantinga's notion of positive apologetics.

### *Plantinga and the Barthian Dilemma*

The only aspect of the theology of Karl Barth that Plantinga ever entertains at any depth is Barth's objection to natural theology, and even then it is only one aspect of Barth's objection to natural theology. Plantinga homes in on an argument Barth makes against an apologetical motivation for natural theology. This argument is lifted from a larger exposition on how it is that God may be known. Barth's broader theme in this section, simply put, is that the only explanation for the knowability of God is that in freedom God "gives Himself to us to be known, thus establishing our knowledge."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Quinn says this is the case for "intellectually sophisticated adults in our culture" ("In Search of the Foundations of Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 4 [1985]: 481–484). Beilby argues that "typical believers" do not take theistic or Christian belief in the purely basic way (*Epistemology as Theology: an Evaluation of Alvin Plantinga's Religious Epistemology* [Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005], 135–137, 139; and "Plantinga's Model of Warranted Christian Belief," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Deane-Peter Baker [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 147–148).

<sup>108</sup> *CD* II/1, 69 (*KD* II/1, 74, "er selber sich uns, unsere Erkenntnis begründend, zu erkennen gibt").

Revelation is “of the Father in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>109</sup> Since the knowledge of God is only received as freely given *from above*, natural theology, which claims an independent knowledge of God in hand *from below*, is impossible. Barth then undertakes to examine why it is that natural theology is so popular. One motivation he considers is the apologetical impulse, ceasing upon the mistaken assumption that natural theology could provide “a common basis of communication between the Church and the world.”<sup>110</sup> Barth strongly affirms the apologetical impulse:

How can the Church be the Church if it is not actively engaged in this work; in the work of inviting and guiding from one point to the other, from the ignorance to the knowledge of God, and therefore from ungodliness to salvation; in the work of pointing the way that leads from the one to the other, and to that extent certainly also in the work of striving for a common basis of communication?<sup>111</sup>

The problem with attempting to deploy natural theology in the service of this “work of love” is that it pretends to take a different starting-point than the only possible starting-point, which is faith. Instead, faith *masks* itself as unbelief. This creates a dilemma.

Plantinga’s reading of the dilemma is, I think, slightly different from what Barth actually proposes to be the dilemma. On Plantinga’s read, the problem is that the believer must either genuinely abandon the stand-point of faith or be dishonest toward the unbeliever. The resolution to this dilemma, according to Plantinga, is simply for the believer not to wear the mask of unbelief at all. In Plantinga’s view, the believer may deploy the resources of natural theology in the service of apologetics while being quite upfront about the fact that “her belief in God is not based on its relation to the deliverances of reason;”<sup>112</sup> and, furthermore, that belief in God should not be based on arguments. For Barth, however, the whole enterprise of natural theology, as we have seen, rests on the assumption that there is a knowledge of God that can be accessed wholly from below, without God’s deliberative, personal, self-revealing action. It might be the

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<sup>109</sup> CD II/1, 68 (KD II/1, 73, “die Offenbarung des Vaters in Jesus Christus durch den Heiligen Geist”).

<sup>110</sup> CD II/1, 91 (KD II/1, 100, “einer gemeinsamen Gesprächsbasis zwischen Kirche und Welt”).

<sup>111</sup> CD II/1, 92 (KD II/1, 101, “Wie wäre die Kirche die Kirche, wenn sie heir nicht im Werk begriffen wäre . . . auch in dem Werk der Bemühung um eine gemeinsame Gesprächsbasis?”).

<sup>112</sup> RBG, 71.

case that the existence of a being bearing a few of the abstract metaphysical attributes of the classical definition of 'God' does follow or is highly likely given other propositions affirmed by the unbeliever. Moreover, attempting to point this out to the unbeliever may be a charitable Christian act. The grave danger of this endeavor, is that it appears to suggest that a genuine knowledge of God is humanly accessible without the Spirit's immediate, deliberative, personal, self-revealing activity in the gift of faith.

Barth's dilemma is slightly different from the one Plantinga finds. For Barth, the apologetical deployment of natural theology entails a masking of faith. The first horn of the dilemma is not that faith would actually abandon itself to remain genuine, but that masquerading faith would achieve a 'successful' result. The second horn is that masquerading faith would fail to convince. Either result will not be the genuine knowledge of God that can only come with the gift of faith, but rather a hardening towards faith. In the case of 'success' it might be that the unbeliever agrees that something like theism could be affirmed on the basis of inference from propositions already held. The problem with this is that it is not faith; it is not a genuine knowledge of God; and, it has not served to move the unbeliever out of self-sufficient reliance on the deliverances of reason to receive a genuine knowledge of God by the Spirit's gift of faith. What is more likely to happen, in Barth's estimation, is that this weak 'success' will inoculate the converted against full-fledged Christian belief. By the introduction of a weak belief under the human steam of 'reason alone' "unbelief will . . . fortify itself all the more against faith."<sup>113</sup> The other horn of the dilemma is that the project will fail entirely. In this case, "unbelief will be of the opinion that it has successfully defended itself against faith,"<sup>114</sup> serving to bolster all the more the self-assurance of unbelief. The unbeliever will think that the claims of faith have been considered and found wanting. In reality, the unbeliever has been allowed to resist a real encounter with the claims of faith, which are not met like a set of proposals to be considered from an academic distance according to their knowability in light of existing beliefs. The claims of faith not only make assertions about what is true and false about God and the world, but are accompanied with the authority of God's own testimony known in a personal encounter with God by the Spirit where the criteria for evaluation of the asserted propositions is

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<sup>113</sup> CD II/1, 93 (KD II/1, 102, "der Unglaube wird . . . sich in ihr . . . häuslich niederlassen und gegen den Glauben erst recht verschanzt").

<sup>114</sup> CD II/1, 93–94 (KD II/1, 103, "dann wird der Unglaube der Meinung sein . . . erfolgreich erwehrt zu haben").

included itself with the gift. The deployment of natural theology in the service of apologetics fails because, instead of challenging human rational self-sufficiency, it panders to it.

Plantinga's conclusions from his brief excursus on Barth are right on target, even if they are an incomplete picture of Barth's position. Plantinga is certainly correct that Barth rejects classical foundationalism and the notion that belief itself should be based on what we can infer from what we already believe. Though Plantinga is happy to countenance a roll for arguments in bolstering weak faith, Barth and Plantinga seem to agree that "the correct and proper way to believe in God. . .[is] not on the basis of arguments from natural theology or anywhere else."<sup>115</sup> There is, however, more to Barth's concern. For Barth, convincing someone with an argument to affirm the existence of a being who possesses a number of the metaphysical attributes traditionally affirmed in classical theism is not a worthwhile accomplishment. Belief on the basis of argument could never be belief in the Christian God, because an argument could never warrant genuine knowledge of the true God. By playing up to reason's assumed self-sufficiency, the approach of natural theology discourages faith.

It is intriguing to think about just what Barth might have made of Plantinga's proposal for escaping the dilemma. Plantinga's suggestion is that apologetics which makes recourse to the positive arguments of natural theology need not be conducted in such a way as to imply that its arguments ought to be taken as the basis for belief. If Plantinga is right, and I think he is, this suggestion appears to neutralize Barth's main concern. We could extend the proposal even further to address Barth's concerns by adding that the Christian apologist would underscore the difference between an affirmation of the conclusion of a natural theological argument and genuine knowledge of the true God. It seems to me that such provisos would mitigate against the worries of Barth's dilemma. The unbeliever who rejects the arguments of natural theology would understand that she has not rejected the basis for Christian belief as taken from the perspective of belief. The unbeliever who accepts the conclusions of an argument from natural theology would see that the warrant for belief in the God who exists derives from God and not the argument.

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<sup>115</sup> *RBG*, 72.

### ***Part III: The Relationship Between Barth and Plantinga on Natural Theology***

The agreement between Barth and Plantinga on natural theology is substantial though not total. Both reject the common assumptions which have grown up around natural theology since the Enlightenment. They agree not only that human arguments are unnecessary for attaining a knowledge of God, but that the deliverances of human reason do not provide adequate warrant for Christian belief. It should not be a surprise that the ways they arrive at this shared conclusion are different. We saw that Barth reasons directly from his theology of revelation. God in his revelation is genuinely humanly known, but also known to be utterly free and unique—a knowledge beyond all independent human capacity. Revelation must be *from above*; it must be the personal self-revelation of the Father. And, it must address the inadequacies of human fallenness and finitude; it must transform the human knower by communion with Jesus Christ. Moreover, it must create its own capacity for human reception; the Spirit of God must provide for the human knower, in the gift of faith, the subjective reception of revelation. The *only* revelation of God to human beings is provided by God is in this, his trinitarian act of self-revelation. This self-revealing describes, therefore, the only possible warrant for Christian belief.

Plantinga does not argue from an elaborate trinitarian theology of revelation. His main point is to defend the possibility of the proper basicity of Christian belief from its flawed philosophical objections. It is, in this sense, a form of negative apologetics—showing up the inadequacy of potential defeaters to divinely initiated revelation. His appeals to Christian theology are not an attempt to demonstrate the truth of the matter. Instead, he takes a model from Christian theology and argues that if it is true then all philosophical objections to it fail. It is significant that for both Barth and Plantinga, the theology of revelation is the pivot point of their arguments. Barth, as a Christian theologian, assumes the basis of faith and argues from it. Plantinga, as a Christian philosopher, considers how a theological account of warrant would impact questions and assumptions in religious epistemology.

This is not to say that Barth and Plantinga fundamentally agree on *all* important aspects of the question of natural theology. There remain several areas of tension that need to be considered, which we will examine under the following three questions: 1) Do Barth and Plantinga agree on a negative role for natural theology? 2) Do they agree on a

positive role for natural theology? 3) Do they agree about the nature of the *sensus divinitatis*?

*Do Barth and Plantinga Agree on a Negative Role for Natural Theology?*

Important to answering this question is to be very clear about what is meant by ‘a negative role.’ We are not concerned here with *via negativa* natural theology, which attempts to arrive at a knowledge of God through a consideration of what God is not. We are, instead, interested in the possibility of natural theology providing a negative service through a challenging of unbelief. There is a suggestion in Barth’s writing that natural theology should not be allowed even a negative function. This arises particularly in connection with Brunner’s *eristics*, which Barth understands to be a kind of negative apologetics that serves as a propaedeutic to faith by confronting the resistance of human rational self-sufficiency.<sup>116</sup> There are significant parallels to Plantinga’s negative apologetical enterprise. Plantinga seeks to undermine the reigning rationally self-sufficient paradigms of justification and warrant in order to defend the possibility of warrant by faith. Why might Barth object to this? What Barth objects to is the idea that theology might depend in some way on the prolegomena of even a negative natural theology. What he opposes is the idea that a negative natural theology might contribute in any substantive way to the actualization of a genuine human knowledge of God. What we find, in fact, is that what Barth really rejects is the idea that negative natural theology might play a *positive* role in coming to faith.<sup>117</sup>

For Plantinga, ‘negative’ apologetics responds to objections to Christian belief; it is aimed at defeating defeaters. In the language of warrant we could class negative natural theology as an attempt to remove barriers to the proper transfer of warrant for Christian belief, without contributing to that warrant. What moves a person to faith is not the human argument. It might seem unlikely, however, that Barth would be content even with these qualifications. Answering objections by appealing to reason might mean entering the realm of the “godless reason of man which is inimical to belief.”<sup>118</sup> Faith has its own resources for defense. Revelation can defend itself. Should we understand Barth as

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<sup>116</sup> CD I/1, 26–31 (KD I/1, 25–30).

<sup>117</sup> As it is first encountered in the *Church Dogmatics*, apologetics and *eristics* are considered and rejected as *necessary* prolegomena to dogmatics (CD I/1, 25–31; KD I/1, 24–30).

<sup>118</sup> CD I/1, 28 (KD I/1, 27, “glaubenslosen und glaubenswidrigen Vernunft des Menschen”).

opposed to the work of Christian philosophers defending the faith against objections? From the material already covered, it should be clear that this is not at all the point of Barth's comments on the rebellion of human reason and the self-vindicating nature of revelation. We can grant that Barth maintains that the struggle between reason and revelation should "not [be] oriented to the contradiction of reason but to the declaration of revelation."<sup>119</sup> This view, however, is not necessarily at odds with Plantinga's approach. Optimally, faith will be so strong that it operates as an *intrinsic defeater-defeater*. Ideally, on the deliverances of faith alone, belief will be so compelling that any objection to it will be unbelievable, and, therefore, not require refutation. But, the fact that the refutation of objections is not required in ideal cases of belief, does not mean that refuting an objection is somehow unhelpful or that it might not be useful in defusing doubt.

Extreme care is needed here to comprehend Barth's position. We ought to ensure that we not reinstate the caricatures that were challenged in chapter 2. There we saw that it is not philosophy or human reason *per se* that Barth opposes, it is the orientation of human reason to unbelief and the false independence with which philosophy approaches the knowability of God. Plantinga's approach, however, is nothing like what Barth is opposing. He certainly understands that the Christian philosopher need not work independently from the light of faith. The Christian apologist need not adopt an orientation of unbelief or assume the autonomy of human reason. In addition, Barth never claims that human reason cannot give us some provisional knowledge of what is true about the world, or the capacity to see in some instances what is logically impossible, even with respect to God. It is only the genuine knowledge of God that Barth insists must come by the transformative grace of God in Christ by the Spirit's gift of faith. Nothing Plantinga affirms about a negative role for natural theology seems to violate these worries. Moreover, Plantinga's position is entirely consistent with Barth's nuanced trinitarian theology of revelation. He acknowledges the helpfulness of removing objections in the service of belief not because of inadequacies in the gift of faith, but because of human resistance. If we consider what Barth means by 'natural theology,' we must conclude that Plantinga's negative natural theology is categorically not a subspecies thereof. In fact, it is exceedingly unlikely that Barth would place Plantinga's negative natural theology under the rubric of 'theology' whatsoever. It is, perhaps, more accurate

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<sup>119</sup> CD I/1, 29 (KD I/1, 27, "nicht am Widerspruch der Vernunft, sondern am Spruch der Offenbarung orientiert").

to classify Plantinga's negative apologetics as a concern of Christian philosophy, while in no way demoting its importance or value for the church. In conclusion, therefore, while Barth does not explicitly endorse any role for negative apologetics,<sup>120</sup> all things considered, Plantinga shows that it is possible to remain consistent with Barth's theology of revelation and the all-sufficiency of the deliverances of faith while maintaining a vital role for and Christian approach to negative apologetics.

We now turn to the question of a *positive* role for natural theology, where we would expect not to find the same degree of compatibility that we have found with respect to a negative role.

### *Do Barth and Plantinga Agree on a Positive Role for Natural Theology?*

If negative natural theology removes barriers to warranted Christian belief without contributing to that warrant, positive natural theology attempts to bolster Christian belief by providing arguments that contribute directly to the warrant for belief. We saw that Plantinga is happy to endorse the benefits of such an enterprise. Arguments in support of Christian belief may be helpful when the warrant humanly received from the deliverances of faith is insufficient for knowledge and, therefore, belief. The value of natural theology is, again, the service it provides in the less than ideal situations of weakened faith. And, Plantinga is clear that the arguments of natural theology could never, on their own, provide sufficient warrant for belief. He seems to accept, nevertheless, the possibility that human arguments might, in some small way, contribute to the warrant for Christian belief. As we have seen, this just will not fly for Barth. The suggestion that the deliverances of human reason might be able to contribute even weakly to a genuine knowledge of God undermines Barth's uncompromising theology of revelation *from*

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<sup>120</sup> Barth does in fact address the question of negative apologetics, but has in mind something much different than Plantinga's proposals. The negative apologetics in Barth's crosshairs is an approach like Brunner's *eristics*, in which a positive case was built on an analysis of the problem of human existence (see Brunner's "Die Andere Aufgabe der Theologie," 255–276). Tjarko Stadtland suggests that Barth proposed a kind of negative natural theology (*Eschatologie und Geschichte in der Theologie des jungen Karl Barth* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966], 116). Bruce McCormack objects to Stadtland's proposal (*Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 259–260). Barth also refuses a negative point of contact in his "Antwort an Erwin Reisner," *Evangelische Theologie* 2 (1935): 51–66; and, he objects to a *via negativa* approach to the knowledge of God in *CD* III/1, 372–375 (*KD* III/1, 426–429).



*above*. Even to crack the door slightly would be to open the flood gates *from below*, fueling the Feuerbachian suspicion and eclipsing any confidence in a genuine human knowledge of God from God. For Barth, we cannot afford to be epistemological semi-Pelagians. *Sola gratia* in theological epistemology must be guarded vigilantly. What is more, any concession here would affirm the possibility of a supplementary revelation to the revelation of God in Christ. This might imply that there is more that can be known about the Father than is revealed in Jesus Christ, which would no less than shatter the unity of the Trinity.<sup>121</sup> The question we face is whether there might be any way to understand Plantinga's openness to a warrant-contributing role for natural theology that does not violate Barth's concerns.

We might begin with the question of whether and how it is possible that warrant for a single belief could come from multiple, combined sources. It seems to me that there are two ways this might go.<sup>122</sup> To make the distinction between these two ways more evident, let me offer the following ordinary kind of belief scenario:

*The Mailman:* At around ten in the morning as my wife is deeply engrossed in the translation of some French manuscript, she is distracted by a sudden though seemingly inarticulate sound. She walks to the front window where she catches a glimpse of a man in the shadows, just exiting through the gate. She does not know what to conclude from this until she realizes the time and remembers that at about this time each day, and without fail, the mailman delivers the post through the slot in our front door. She immediately forms the warranted conclusion that it was the mailman she saw and the sound of the mail coming through the door that she heard.

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<sup>121</sup> "If revelation is to be taken seriously as God's presence, if there is to be a valid belief in revelation, then in no sense can Christ and the Spirit be subordinate hypostases. In the predicate and object of the concept revelation we must again have, and to no less a degree, the subject itself. Revelation and revealing must be equal to the revealer" (*CD* I/1, 353; *KD* I/1, 372).

<sup>122</sup> It should be clear that the following analysis is not a theological argument; instead, I am adopting a Plantinga-like inductive approach from instances of ordinary belief in support of a proposal for how we might conceive of the contribution of natural theology within a Barthian theology of revelation.

There are at least two ways to understand the nature of the combination of warrant in this scenario. One possibility (for ease of reference—CW<sup>1</sup>) is that warrant for the belief actually derives by an inference made on the basis of beliefs that issue from multiple independent faculties. Sense perception weakly captures a sound and a figure, and issues the belief, along with the attending obscure phenomenology, that a sound was heard and a figure seen. A belief about the time of day is formed perhaps purely on the basis of circadian rhythm. And, a belief about the regularity and punctuality of the mailman issues from memory. At this point, reason takes on a coordinating role forming the belief on the basis of inference from other beliefs that the mailman was seen and heard. As with any case of inference, the warrant for the inference in CW<sup>1</sup> will only be as strong as the warrant for the beliefs it is inferred from. In CW<sup>1</sup> there is a real combination of sources. If any of the sources mentioned is removed, warrant for the conclusion would be diminished.

There is, however, a second possibility for how things might go—CW<sup>2</sup>. CW<sup>2</sup> proceeds exactly as CW<sup>1</sup> except that something interesting happens with respect to the faculty of sense perception. The faculty of sense perception does not always complete its task immediately. As my wife is processing the other sources of warrant for her conclusion the phenomenal experiences of the faculty of sense perception are still fresh in mind. In CW<sup>2</sup> the suggestion of the inference assists either external rationality in its formation of the phenomenal experience, or internal rationality in its forming of the appropriate belief in response to that phenomenology. In other words, the inference serves as a catalyst for the proper functioning of the faculty of sense experience. My wife now more clearly perceives the sound that initially broke into her state of concentration and the figure she saw exiting our gate. The belief she holds about having heard and seen the mailman is no longer a deduction, but, more securely, a perception. The warrant for the belief now swings free from the other sources and the inference. It is even possible that she might discover she was incorrect about the time, or forgot that the post is wildly unpredictable in our town. But, if it were indeed the mailman she encountered, she could now be warranted in her belief, held in the basic way on the basis of sense perception alone,<sup>123</sup> even if the same belief earlier held on the basis of the catalyzing inference was, in fact, unwarranted.

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<sup>123</sup> Note that I take the faculty of sense perception to be more than the presentation of strictly empirical data. Sense perception also includes the learned apprehension of the forms of that data.

Returning to the possibility of a positive role for natural theological arguments, we can now ask whether there is a construal of multiple sources of warrant along the lines of either CW<sup>1</sup> or CW<sup>2</sup> that would be free from Barth's proscriptions. It seems to me that this is exactly what we have if the relationship between inference and basic belief is as it is in CW<sup>2</sup>. Consider another scenario, this time one of theistic belief:

*Theistic Belief (Faith + Human Testimony):* Joe Bloggs does not believe that God exists, but he does notice that he has some inclinations to believe. Unbeknownst to Joe, the Holy Spirit is active in his life, offering him transforming faith. Unfortunately, because of internal and environment resistance, the deliverances of faith are not yet strong enough in Joe to warrant belief. He does, however, have a few new friends who are strong believers and insist to Joe that God is very real. On the basis of the testimony of his friends in combination with the otherwise insufficient deliverances of faith, Joe find himself believing and warrantably so.

The sources of warrant are different in this scenario than they were in the previous scenario, though inference may still play a role. Belief on the basis of testimony may involve an inference from a basic belief in the credibility of Joe's friends and the earnestness of their conviction.<sup>124</sup> There is, in any case, a CW<sup>2</sup>-like way to think about the relationship of the identified contributors to warrant. Warrant by way of testimony could be seen to be acting as a catalyst for belief that will properly rest on the deliverances of faith alone. If things go in the CW<sup>2</sup>-way, Joe's belief will grow independent of the testimony and credibility of his friends. The testimony of friends serves to clarify the deliverances of faith in accordance with proper function. Human testimony cooperates with the testimony of the Holy Spirit not as an independent source of warrant, but as one condition under which faith by the Spirit is realized.

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<sup>124</sup> If we follow Thomas Reid's thought on testimony and credulity, believing testimony involves no inference. Credibility is assumed, though it can be defeated by discrediting the witness. Credulity is an innate gift and a natural faculty—"a disposition to confide in the veracity of others and to believe what they tell us" (Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind: An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, eds. Dugald Stewart and G. N. Wright [London: T. Tegg, 1843], Ch. 6, Sec. 24, 567).

This scenario is particularly helpful for thinking about the problem at hand for three reasons. Firstly, the scenario seems to capture the experience that many believers have when coming to belief. Many believers experience a transition from the partial support of the testimony of friends or parents to believing in the basic way. Secondly, the fact that this is so does not seem to violate any of Barth's concerns. This scenario of belief, even though it begins with a belief based partially on inference (or a natural capacity to believe testimony), fits well with Barth's theology of revelation. This is especially the case if we understand God to be directly involved with Joe's believing the testimony of his friends or perceiving their credibility. Thirdly, we can quite easily alter the scenario by replacing the testimony of friends with a natural theological argument. If it is true that the deliverances of faith and human testimony could combine in the CW<sup>2</sup>-way and not violate Barth's concerns, then it should be the same for an argument from inference.

It seems that CW<sup>2</sup>-type warrant collaboration is the best way to understand Plantinga's suggestion that other sources of warrant may combine with the deliverances of faith to bolster belief. Plantinga may tip his hat in this direction in the following comments on the warrant-boost of arguments:

Theistic arguments can obviously be of value for those who don't already believe, they can move them closer to belief, and can bring it about that belief in God is at any rate among the live options for them. Only God bestows saving faith, of course, but his way of doing so can certainly involve cooperation with his children, as in preaching and even argumentation.<sup>125</sup>

The view here seems to be of arguments functioning as warrant catalysts within the orchestration of the sovereign action of God. There is no sense of an independent rational capacity to bring oneself to belief or even to contribute to the warrant for full fledged faith. Plantinga, moreover, draws a parallel between the testimony of preaching and the function of arguments. Taken in the CW<sup>2</sup>-way, what is compelling about a proclamation or what seems reasonable about an argument does not become a permanent fixture of the warrant for belief. Argumentation, like proclamation, serves (non-arbitrarily) as a catalyst

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<sup>125</sup> Plantinga, "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," 40.

by the power of God to clarify the deliverances of faith according to proper function.<sup>126</sup> Read in the CW<sup>2</sup>-way, Plantinga's notion of the positive role of natural theology does not conflict with Barth's theology of revelation.

There is a critical difficulty, however, with this proposal for harmonizing Plantinga with Barth. The problem is that, while Plantinga does seem to endorse the CW<sup>2</sup> construal of warrant source collaboration, where *mature* belief will derive from the deliverances of faith alone, he certainly never repudiates CW<sup>1</sup>, where knowledge is enabled partially on the basis of the supplementary warrant of natural theological argumentation. Is this one point, therefore, where Plantinga and Barth simply part ways? Has Plantinga compromised on epistemological *sola gratia*? Not necessarily. To see why, we need to remember that on Plantinga's system, the work of the Spirit and the deliverances of faith have a critical enabling impact on other sources of warrant. The IIHS is conceived of as part of a process that addresses the noetic effects of sin to restore proper function in other faculties. What is more, the deliverances of faith begin to transform one's interpretive grid in ways that may be enormously influential to *internal rationality*, which is the place where belief formation is completed for all belief forming faculties or processes. Assessing the probabilities associated with historical evidence<sup>127</sup> or the strength of the premises of an argument depends to a great degree on the relative priorities of one's existing nexus of belief. It is, therefore, possible to maintain that even on the CW<sup>1</sup> construal of collaborative warrant, those sources of warrant that supplement the deliverances of faith, to the extent that they are contributing to the warrant for theistic or Christian belief, do so by the influence of the transformational work of the Holy Spirit. In this case, alternative sources of warrant are not understood strictly as *catalysts* for belief by the deliverances of faith, but rather as *extensions* of the deliverances of faith. In this light, even arguments that support faith can be seen as operating not by mere human strength, but by the deliberate action of God. God creates and sustains his own possibility

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<sup>126</sup> The interpretation of Plantinga in the above citation may also hang on the notion of 'saving faith,' which we will take up in the next chapter.

<sup>127</sup> While Plantinga is open to historical evidence supplementing warrant from the IIHS to boost the warrant for belief in the resurrection of Jesus, he is clear that properly judging the probabilities involved is not possible on the basis of the data alone. See *WCB*, 271–280, and, 'Ad Wykstra' in "Reply" (2002), 124–128. Keith Mascord incorrectly suggests that Plantinga allows no role whatsoever for arguments from historical evidence in support of Christian belief (*Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics*, 168ff, 207–209).

of being known, making use of arguments from reason as the harmonic cognitive reverberations of faith, creating a crescendo of warrant sufficient for knowledge.

In summary, I have argued that there are good ways of thinking about the function of natural theological arguments that do not run afoul of Barth's anathemas. Barth's objections to natural theology are based on the impossibility of independent human sources of the knowledge of God outside of the deliberative action of God's self-revelation in Christ by the Spirit. If we understand the arguments of natural theology to function as catalysts to or extensions of the deliverances of faith, there is nothing *independently* natural about them. My proposal is not only that this gives us a way to understand Plantinga's notion of the positive role of natural theology in a way that does not conflict with Barth's theology of revelation or epistemological *sola gratia*. It also provides the best way to understand Plantinga's direct comments on the matter and their coherence with his wider *corpus*.

#### *Do Barth and Plantinga Agree About the Nature of the Sensus Divinitatis?*

We return now to a question raised by Plantinga's A/C model in chapter 4. In Barth's view, the dangers of natural theology have to do not only with human arguments, but with any natural human capacity for the knowledge of God which functions independently of the supernatural activity of divine self-revelation. Does this rule out the possibility of a *sensus divinitatis* as Plantinga conceives? The distinction is drawn fairly clearly by Plantinga. "On my model, there is both natural knowledge of God by way of the *sensus divinitatis* ('SD') and non-natural or supernatural knowledge of God, knowledge that comes as a result of the IIHS."<sup>128</sup> The *sensus divinitatis* is "part of our original increated cognitive equipment."<sup>129</sup> The IIHS, by contrast, "consists in direct divine activity,"<sup>130</sup> and was inaugurated as "a special divine response to sin."<sup>131</sup> Sin has a debilitating effect on the proper functioning of the *sensus divinitatis*; but, "by virtue of the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those to whom faith is given, the ravages of sin (including the cognitive damage) are repaired, gradually or suddenly, to a greater or lesser extent."<sup>132</sup>

<sup>128</sup> 'Ad Sudduth' in "Reply" (2002), 132.

<sup>129</sup> WCB, 246n10.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> WCB, 180.

<sup>132</sup> WCB, 243–244.

This means that on Plantinga's scheme a natural human capacity for knowledge of God can be restored to some degree as a result of the combined revealing and healing work of the Spirit who ministers to us the benefits of Jesus Christ.

It would certainly appear that Barth dismissed Brunner for far less than this. Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis* seems to fit the description of exactly what Barth rejects— independent human access to a knowledge of God. But, just what does the *sensus divinitatis* deliver? Plantinga's A/C model, which draws from Calvin's development of the *sensus divinitatis*,<sup>133</sup> is intended to explain how *theistic* belief might have warrant. The *sensus divinitatis* provides a rather minimalist 'awareness of divinity,' which, for Plantinga, does not amount to much more than an awareness that God exists and should be worshiped and obeyed.<sup>134</sup> Specifying the content of this knowledge is a slippery business. What is meant by any assertion depends in part on what is meant by the referring terms. If God is to be the referent of the affirmation of existence, and the affirmation is meant really to affirm something, then God must somehow be known by the referrer. The *sensus divinitatis* cannot provide a knowledge of God's existence without an accompanying knowledge of *who* exists. What is the nature of this knowledge of the referent who is known to exist? This is a difficult but important question—one that will inform decisively our understanding of the apparent disagreement between Barth and Plantinga. The question turns on precisely what they believe counts as knowledge of God, which we will address in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

The differences between Plantinga and Barth on the *sensus divinitatis* may be similar to the other differences on natural theology which we have considered. They do not expose a fundamental theological or philosophical incompatibility. The differences are better explained as the consequence of differences in the purpose and nature of their work. As a Christian theologian Barth is attempting to reflect the inner priorities of Christian theology and emphasize those priorities over and against critical areas of potential distortion. It would be antithetical to Barth's task if he were to highlight the

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<sup>133</sup> "Here I want to propose a model based on Calvin's version of the suggestion, not because I think Calvin should be the cynosure of all eyes theological, but because he presents an interesting development of the particular thought in question" (WCB, 170).

<sup>134</sup> WCB, 177. Plantinga is, in this respect, still following Calvin.

virtues of our epistemological gifts without emphasizing their utter inadequacy outside of God's giving of himself to be known and his decision to involve our faculties in his self-revealing. Plantinga's purposes are considerably different. He operates as a Christian philosopher with the particular goal of defending the possibility that belief could have warrant without reposing on an argument or demonstrable evidence. Plantinga's models are intentionally theologically minimalist. Though they are intended to be faithful to Christian theology, they make no pretenses of being comprehensive theological accounts.

In this chapter we began with a clarification of the main concerns that drive Barth's objection to natural theology. I argued that the only construal of natural theology that would be compatible with Barth's theology of revelation is one that maintains that God can only be genuinely known in his personal, trinitarian act of self-revelation. Any aspect of the created order may serve as the locus of divine revealing, but never its source. We then turned to Plantinga's much more modest objection to natural theology, which consists of an argument for both the insufficiency and the non-necessity of natural theological arguments for warranted theistic or Christian belief. Finally, we focused on the points of apparent tension where Plantinga's proposals threaten to encroach on Barth's concerns. I reasoned that natural theological arguments in Plantinga's thought are best understood as functioning within the realm of supernatural revelation and not independent from it. Such arguments are either defensive, and do not contribute at all to the warrant for belief, or they function as catalysts to or extensions of the deliverances of faith. We left open for analysis in the next chapter the possibility of that Plantinga's notion of the *sensus divinitatis* delivers the kind of natural knowledge of God Barth rejects.

There remains a critical area of investigation that we have explicitly avoided in the discussion on natural theology. This is the question of the relationship between faith and what constitutes a *genuine* knowledge of God. An assessment of the compatibility and complementarity of Barth and Plantinga will require adequately understanding what is meant by their core conceptions of faith and the knowledge of God.



## 6

**FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE:  
WHAT CONSTITUTES A GENUINE HUMAN  
KNOWLEDGE OF GOD?**

In chapter 5 we discussed the views of Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga on natural theology and apologetics. Taking advantage of the groundwork laid in chapters 1 and 2, we established that, Barth's principal concern is to maintain that a *genuine* knowledge of God is only possible by the free, self-revealing action of the Father through the Son by the Spirit. I argued that there are ways of thinking about revelation and rational arguments which preserve Barth's concern for the centrality of divine self-revealing action. I suggested, furthermore, plausible interpretations of Plantinga's thought in which free divine action retained an exclusive warrant-contributing role. In that discussion, however, we bracketed a crucial question. Do Barth and Plantinga have the same thing in mind when they speak about knowing God? A difference on this point could be quite significant, either masking disagreement or exaggerating tension. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify what constitutes a genuine human knowledge of God according to Barth and Plantinga, and to assess the impact of the differences between them. We will find that Barth operates with a stricter notion of the nature of the knowledge of God, while Plantinga offers helpful distinctions among various kinds of knowledge. These differences highlight important areas for clarification and analysis regarding, particularly, the relationships between transforming faith, personal revelation and rational propositions.

## **Barth and Three Aspects of the Knowledge of Faith**

In chapter 1, we noted that, for Barth, revelation is the miracle of divine personal self-disclosure to human beings. Revelation is, in fact, personified in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son.<sup>1</sup> He is the real content of revelation. In the incarnation, Scripture and preaching, God uses creaturely means to speak to creatures. Not even in the incarnation, however, does revelation become transparent through the creaturely veil. Christ's human nature remains human, it is not divinized. Human blindness remains not only because of the noetic effects of sin, but even more fundamentally, because of the limits of creatures and creaturely media to *contain* divine revelation. Knowledge of God only becomes a human possibility by the free decision of God, who, through the work of the Spirit and by means of creaturely media, gives human beings a sharing in the knowledge of Christ. This process of coming to know God is the gift of faith. Only in faith does the Spirit (the *revealedness* of God) become for us our subjective apprehension of the knowledge of God.<sup>2</sup>

For Barth, a human knowledge of God is *genuine* if and only if it is knowledge by faith. Our objective here, therefore, is to discern, if possible, what it means to know God by faith. We made significant progress in this direction in chapter 1. There we saw, among other things, that for Barth the knowledge of God is personal, cognitive, and transformative. It is worth unpacking these notions again briefly here.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the first thing to note is that *personal*, *cognitive* and *transformative* do not refer to three distinct kinds of knowing. It is better to think of these qualifiers as designating three aspects of an integrative, unitary knowledge. We will seek to distinguish each qualifier, one from the other, for the sake of understanding the breadth of

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<sup>1</sup> "For He is revelation, divine-human reality" (CD I/1, 18; KD I/1, 17).

<sup>2</sup> "If one asks about the reality of the knowledge of God, which is so inconceivable in its How, which can be revealed only by God, which can be proclaimed by man only in the service of God and in virtue of His presence; if one asks what this reality is in so far as the knowability of God is included within it, the only possible answer which is both accurate and exhaustive is that this reality is faith" (CD I/1, 228; KD I/1, 240).

<sup>3</sup> Barth felt that the most appropriate word for describing the knowledge of faith was *Anerkennung* (acknowledgement). He identifies three characteristics of the Word of God as the speech of God. The Word of God is *spiritual*, *personal* and *purposive*. These correspond respectively to our *cognitive*, *personal* and *transformational*. See CD I/1, 132–143, 205 (KD I/1, 136–148, 214).

Barth's conception. It would, however, be a serious mistake to think that these three aspects of the knowledge of faith stand on their own or operate independently.

As we have already mentioned, the controlling feature of Barth's notion of revelation is the personal, free, trinitarian action of God. It is the personal nature of revelation that makes revelation both cognitive and transformative. The knowledge of God is said to be *personal* because it is fundamentally a being brought to Jesus Christ, the personal revelation of God. "Faith . . . is the gracious address of God to man, the free personal presence of Jesus Christ in his activity."<sup>4</sup> Knowledge by faith is not principally a transfer of information or abstract mental illumination. The knowledge of faith is personal on both the divine side and on the human side—it is God's personal encounter with human persons.<sup>5</sup>

One consequence of this personal encounter with God is human transformation, the inauguration of the healing of sinful humanity and the beginning of repentance. In Barth's view, revelation is reconciliation,<sup>6</sup> and the eschatological consummation of reconciliation is redemption.<sup>7</sup> Revelation does not instantly and absolutely eradicate the corruption of human conceptuality and language; nevertheless, it overcomes the noetic effects of sin to provide genuine human knowing, thereby initiating the proper human response. Consequently, the impact of personal divine address includes human acknowledgement of and submission to Revelation. In Barth's assessment of *πίστις* in the New Testament, he concludes that, while the action and faithfulness of God is the foundational principle, the term also embraces faith's human impact and response.<sup>8</sup> The transformation of revelation

<sup>4</sup> CD I/1, 18 (KD I/1, 17, "der Glaube . . . ist . . . die gnädige Zuwendung Gottes zum Menschen, die freie persönliche Gegenwart Jesu Christi im Handeln des Menschen").

<sup>5</sup> Speaking of the reformers, Barth writes "they could understand the presence of the holy God among unholy men only as the grace of the strictly personal free Word of God which reaches its goal in the equally personal free hearing of men, the hearing of faith" (CD I/1, 68; KD I/1, 69).

<sup>6</sup> "The work of the Son or Word is the presence and declaration of God which, in view of the fact that it takes place miraculously in and in spite of human darkness, we can only describe as revelation. The term reconciliation is another word for the same thing" (CD I/1, 409; KD I/1, 429–30).

<sup>7</sup> "He is not just the Redeemer, so surely does redemption stand in indissoluble correlation with reconciliation, so surely does reconciliation reach its consummation in redemption" (CD I/1, 471; KD I/1, 494).

<sup>8</sup> "In the *πίστις* 'Ιησού Χριστού we see the divine decision made about man. Only then and on this basis does the word slip down, as it were, into the sphere of human actions; now . . . *πίστις* is fairly frequently

is a feature of being drawn into participation by the Spirit in Christ's knowing of the Father.<sup>9</sup>

The other consequence of the personal nature of revelation is human cognitive content. As stressed in the first chapter, Barth's affirmation of the personal character of faith should not be taken to mean that revelation is strictly numinous, amorphously experiential or exclusively meta-cognitive.<sup>10</sup> He firmly underscores the cognitive, verbal and rational nature of divine address.<sup>11</sup> Despite Barth's forthright statements, his reserves about divine freedom and creaturely limitations leave some with the impression that Barth is finally endorsing bald irrationalism.<sup>12</sup> It is my view that this confusion may have at its root a misunderstanding of Barth's fundamental attitude toward propositions with respect to revelation. Is propositional knowledge a facet of the genuine knowledge of God given by faith? Getting clear about Barth's views regarding propositions, furthermore, is important for our assessment of a tension raised in chapter 3, where we noted that Barth tends to emphasize the personal character of revelation, while Plantinga emphasizes the propositional. I will approach this question by first entertaining three contemporary works on revelation—those of C. Stephen Evans, Paul Helm and Nicholas Wolterstorff—each of which links Barth in some way to what might be called a *non-propositional* view.

### *The Critiques of Evans, Helm and Wolterstorff*

C. Stephen Evans associates Barth with “neo-orthodox theologians” who advocate a ‘non-propositional’ view of revelation.<sup>13</sup> Evans does not directly assert that Barth himself

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and clearly described as trust, as the attitude in men in which they honour and revere the worth of God” (CD I/1, 228; KD I/1, 240).

<sup>9</sup> As Barth says, “the mutual indwelling and indeed the union of the divine and human *logos* in faith cannot be ignored or denied. This mutual indwelling or union is the knowability of the Word of God” (CD I/1, 242; KD I/1, 253).

<sup>10</sup> Barth sharply dismisses Rudolf Otto's “Das Heilige” as numinous, irrational and, therefore, indistinguishable from “an absolutised natural force” (CD I/1, 135; KD I/1, 140).

<sup>11</sup> See especially CD I/1, 135–138 (KD I/1, 139–143).

<sup>12</sup> See discussion and references in chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup> “Faith and Reason,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 325–327.

holds this view strictly, though it would be easy to take this as implied.<sup>14</sup> Evans presents the neo-orthodox, non-propositional view as a reaction against liberal theology. Liberal theologians, adopting the “traditional understanding of revelation as propositional,”<sup>15</sup> subjected the propositions of the Bible to increasing suspicion, thereby compromising its authority. Evans concludes that the neo-orthodox response was to assert that revelation does not convey propositions. Revelation proceeds on the occasion of reading the Bible “as the Spirit of God illumines the *hearts* of those who read and listen with openness.”<sup>16</sup> Evans helpfully points out, however, that one need not adopt a *strictly* non-propositional view of revelation to appreciate the insight that “the *primary* object of revelation is God himself, not propositions about God, and the *primary* purpose of revelation is making possible a relationship with God.”<sup>17</sup> We might term such a view the *not-merely-propositional* view, over and against the *strictly non-propositional* view. It should be clear that the *strictly non-propositional* view cannot apply to Barth. As we have already demonstrated, Barth is adamant that revelation engages the mind. It is rational and verbal. Unless this is absolute double-speak, clearly he is affirming *some* propositional element to revelation. The *not-merely-propositional* view, I would suggest, is Barth’s actual view—that revelation has *both* non-propositional and propositional aspects. It is safe to say that Barth would agree with Evans’ conclusion that revelation, in its paradigmatic verbal forms, cannot be *strictly* non-propositional, and that God’s personal self-disclosure inevitably involves the revelation of “some truth’s about himself.”<sup>18</sup>

Paul Helm draws a slightly different conclusion about Barth’s notion of revelation. Helm determines that if revelation is propositional, it must be *epistemically objective*. Something is epistemically objective “if what is known by one person about that object can be remembered and communicated to others for them to know.”<sup>19</sup> Helm says that

<sup>14</sup> Evans has confirmed to me in private conversation that he does not mean to assert that Barth’s view is best understood as the *strictly non-propositional* view.

<sup>15</sup> Evans, “Faith and Reason,” 325.

<sup>16</sup> Evans, “Faith and Reason,” 326 (emphasis mine).

<sup>17</sup> Evans, “Faith and Reason,” 327.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. In fact, Barth’s view comports quite well with Evans’ later treatment of Kierkegaard and Plantinga (335–341).

<sup>19</sup> Helm, Paul, *The Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues* (London: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1982), 40. Plantinga’s notion of ‘objectivity’ as “being oriented toward . . . the *object* of knowledge” corresponds with Barth’s view. “What is objective may be thought of as coming from the object rather than from myself as subject” (WCB, 417–418).

Barth “denies the objectivity of revelation” because epistemic objectivity implies that revelation is static, and subject to human control, which is a violation of God’s sovereign freedom in revelation.<sup>20</sup> He concludes, therefore, that Barth rejects the possibility of revelation being propositional.<sup>21</sup> Helm’s primary critique of Barth is that he is wrong to assume that epistemic objectivity subjects an object to the control of those who have epistemically objective knowledge of it.<sup>22</sup> Helm’s analysis suffers from a misunderstanding of the logic of Barth’s position. Barth is not worried that epistemic objectivity would subject God to human control. Barth is concerned to safeguard against the presumption that genuine human knowledge of God could be a human possession *outside and independent of* divine self-disclosure in the gift of faith.<sup>23</sup> In fact, Barth has no problems with the epistemic objectivity of God, so long as it is not seen to be a function of an independently held human capacity, rather than the epistemic objectivity of faith.<sup>24</sup> In Barth’s view, the gift of faith—divinely enabled epistemic objectivity—is the basis for preaching, which is precisely an attempt to ‘remember and communicate’ truth truly in the light of revelation.<sup>25</sup> Directed against conclusions like those of Helm, Barth gives the following plea: “We have made a positive assertion, pronouncing a definite Yes

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<sup>20</sup> Helm, Paul, *The Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues*, 40–41.

<sup>21</sup> Helm, Paul, *The Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues*, 46.

<sup>22</sup> Helm, Paul, *The Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues*, 45–46.

<sup>23</sup> It is Barth’s understanding of the nature of revelation as thoroughly divine gift, not subject to human demonstration or isolated possession, that also eludes Keith Ward. He makes the mystifying claim that Barth’s view of revelation is motivated by pride and self-exaltation. “Of course one has an interest in thinking one’s own religion is the only true one; it enables one to dismiss the others as of no account and so bask in the superiority of one’s own possession of truth. . . . One can hardly get more proud, more self-righteous, and more short-sighted than that” (*Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World’s Religions* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994], 17).

<sup>24</sup> “We can grasp [God’s Word] only in faith. We are set in the greatest clarity in relation to the one, in such clarity that we have very distinct and in themselves clear thoughts regarding what is said to us, and we can react thereto with the whole outer and inner attitude of our lives” (*CD I/1*, 174; *KD I/1*, 181).

<sup>25</sup> “We must be very clear that the simplest proclamation of the Gospel can be proclamation of the truth in the most unlimited sense and can validly communicate the truth to the most unsophisticated hearer if God so will” (*CD I/1*, 83; *KD I/1*, 85).

to the knowability of the Word of God. . . . others ought not so stubbornly to hear only the No in what has been said.”<sup>26</sup>

Nicholas Wolterstorff offers a more careful and penetrating analysis of Barth’s theology of revelation. His conclusion, however, is similar to Helm’s. Wolterstorff claims that despite all of Barth’s talk about revelation as the speech of God, “there’s less in Barth on God speaking than first appears.”<sup>27</sup> Wrestling with many of Barth’s intricate statements, Wolterstorff seems to grasp Barth’s key distinction between revelation *per se* and the media of revelation.<sup>28</sup> He also grasps just how unflinching Barth is in maintaining that a medium of revelation can never be equated with revelation *per se*.<sup>29</sup> While apparently noticing Barth’s insistence that there is a real revealing, a real divine speaking through the media of revelation, the connection between God’s speech and the medium of human speech is too tenuous for Wolterstorff. He draws the unfortunate conclusion that what Barth calls God’s speech, when encountered through a medium, is not, in fact, appropriately referred to as ‘speech.’<sup>30</sup> Instead, what God does through the medium of human witness is to ‘speak to’ the heart not the head of the hearer. This conclusion is simply untenable in light of Barth’s consistent and emphatic declarations both that God speaks, particularly through Scripture and preaching, and that this speech is verbal, cognitive and rational.<sup>31</sup> What has Wolterstorff missed? The chief failing in Wolterstorff’s assessment is a failure to come to grips with Barth’s view that a human medium could be appropriated for divine discourse without being equated with it. Scripture is not divine discourse, *in and of itself*. The qualifier ‘in and of itself’ is absolutely crucial. This does not mean, for Barth, that God does not speak through

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<sup>26</sup> CD I/1, 196 (KD I/1, 204–205, “Wir haben eine positive Feststellung gemacht, haben in bezug auf die Erkennbarkeit des Wortes Gottes ein bestimmtes Ja ausgesprochen. . . . der Andere sollte doch nicht so beharrlich in allem nur das Nein hören”).

<sup>27</sup> Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 58,72.

<sup>28</sup> Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Divine Discourse*, 65. As we saw in chapter 1, Barth often refers to this as the distinction between content and form (CD I/1, 175; KD I/1, 182).

<sup>29</sup> Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Divine Discourse*, 68–70.

<sup>30</sup> Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Divine Discourse*, 72.

<sup>31</sup> It may be sufficient to observe that the first thing Barth says about the nature of the Word of God is that it is speech. And, according to Barth, part of what it means that the Word of God is the speech of God is that “the encounter of God and man takes place primarily, pre-eminently and characteristically in this sphere of *ratio*” (CD I/1, 135; KD I/1, 139).

Scripture. It means that what drives and enables that speech is not a property or capacity of the medium. The human medium does not contain or convey the Word of God on its own, but it does serve as a genuine medium when accompanied by the work of the Spirit in the gift of faith.

There is, however, a deeper point to which Wolterstorff leads us—one that is pivotal for understanding Barth's theological motivations. Wolterstorff says that to understand Barth one must "realize that he is the most relentlessly Chalcedonian of all Christian theologians."<sup>32</sup> It is clear from his discussion, however, that Wolterstorff is only thinking of one side of the Chalcedonian formula—that which stresses the unity of the natures in one person. From this he draws the mistaken conclusion that in the incarnation the humanity of Jesus unmediatedly communicates the divine. Barth has in mind both sides of Chalcedon, including the stipulation that in the unity of the person the natures are not to be confused. Consequently, Barth did not hold, as Wolterstorff suggests, that veiling and unveiling do not apply to revelation by means of the human Jesus<sup>33</sup> or that the human speech of Jesus can be simply equated with divine discourse<sup>34</sup> without the provisos that attend other kinds of human media taken up in revelation.<sup>35</sup> For Barth, this mistake is at the heart of a cancer that plagues theology, which is precisely why the proper distinction between form and content in revelation is so important to grasp.

Can the incarnation of the Word according to the biblical witnesses mean that the existence of the man Jesus of Nazareth was as it were in itself, in its own power and continuity, the revealing Word of God? Is the *humanitas Christi* as such the revelation? Does the divine sonship of Jesus Christ mean that God's revealing has now been transmitted as it were to the existence of the man Jesus of Nazareth, that this has thus become identical with it? At this stage we can only reply that when this view has

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<sup>32</sup> Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Divine Discourse*, 64.

<sup>33</sup> Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Divine Discourse*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Divine Discourse*, 73.

<sup>35</sup> As Trevor Hart explains, "the vehicle of revelation, even when it is hypostatically united with God, is not itself God. Information about Jesus' life, character, actions, death and resurrection is not knowledge of God in the sense that Barth intends it and in the event of revelation it is precisely *God himself* who is known" ("Revelation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John B. Webster [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 52).



really been held, there has always been more or less clearly discernible the very thing which, as we have seen, the Old Testament tried to avoid with its concept of the holiness of the revealed God, namely, the possibility of having God disclose Himself through man, of allowing man to set himself on the same platform as God, to grasp Him there and thus to become His master. The “fairest Lord Jesus” of mysticism, the “Saviour” of Pietism, Jesus the teacher of wisdom and friend of man in the Enlightenment, Jesus the quintessence of enhanced humanity in Schleiermacher, Jesus the embodiment of the idea of religion in Hegel and his school, Jesus a religious personality according to Carlyle’s picture in the theology of the end of the 19th century—all this looks at least very dubiously like a profane and sacrilegious intrusion in the Old Testament sense in which it is thought possible to come to terms, as it were, with the presence of God in Christ and to take control of it with the help of certain conceptions deriving from the humanity.<sup>36</sup>

Benefiting from the fruit of our engagement with Wainwright, Helm and Wolterstorff, we are ready to attempt to clarify how Barth conceives of the relationship between revelation and propositional knowledge. But, before we do, we may benefit from a brief digression in order to clarify what we mean by ‘propositional knowledge.’

## ***The Propositional Form and Content of the Knowledge of Faith***

### *A Digression on Propositional Knowing*

We have already suggested that the kind of knowledge Plantinga is primarily concerned with is propositional knowledge. Propositional knowledge is, simply, knowledge of propositions. In order to count as knowledge, of course, the proposition known must be true, it must be understood and it must be warrantably believed. Just what is a proposition? According to Plantinga, “these are the things that are true or false; they are also the things we believe, and the things expressed by our sentences.”<sup>37</sup> This implies

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<sup>36</sup> CD I/1, 323 (KD I/1, 341).

<sup>37</sup> “Replies to My Colleagues,” In *Alvin Plantinga*, eds. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1985), 355.

an obvious, though occasionally overlooked, distinction between propositions and the sentences used to express them. Plantinga explains further, “when one sincerely asserts a proposition *p*, then one believes *p* (and hence grasps or understands it) and asserts *p* by way of assertively uttering a sentence that expresses *p*.”<sup>38</sup> I take it that when Plantinga says ‘a sentence expresses a proposition’ this is short-hand for ‘a sentence is used by a person to express a proposition.’<sup>39</sup> The truth or falsehood of a sentence is judged on the basis of the truth or falsehood of the proposition which is intended to be expressed by means of the sentence.<sup>40</sup> The suitability of a sentence as the vehicle of the expression of a proposition will depend on all of the many factors that impact communication. A sentence, therefore, does not have the capacity perfectly to convey a proposition. Instead, as Plantinga affirms, the expression of a proposition by a sentence is successful when, “my interlocutor, upon hearing the sentence I use, grasps or apprehends the very proposition in question—the very proposition I believe, intend to assert, and express by my sentence.”<sup>41</sup> In Plantinga’s view, our grasp or apprehension of a proposition is not an all or nothing venture, it is a matter of degree.<sup>42</sup> One more obvious point to make is that propositions are about things, things that are referred to in sentences under some description or proper name. Sentences expressing propositions are typically composed of subjects, predicates and predicating terms; to grasp a proposition firmly one must apprehend clearly what is meant by each of these components.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Replies to My Colleagues,” 355.

<sup>39</sup> In other words, I believe the proposition Plantinga means to assert with the sentence ‘a sentence expresses a proposition’ is better expressed using the sentence ‘a sentence is used by a person to express a proposition.’

<sup>40</sup> See Plantinga, “Divine Knowledge,” in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 43, where he also notes that not every sentence is intended to express a proposition.

<sup>41</sup> “Replies to My Colleagues,” 355.

<sup>42</sup> “Replies to My Colleagues,” 356.

<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that the traditional ‘propositional’ sentence is certainly not the only vehicle for expressing propositions. Propositions can be given expression by means of other linguistic genres (e.g., poetry, parable, etc.). Propositions can also be expressed through non-linguistic means (e.g., sculpture, interpretive dance, etc.). These forms may serve to evoke or express more than propositions, though often not less. These forms may have the advantage of addressing non-cognitive barriers to and personal dimensions of knowing. The advantage of the traditional sentence in ‘propositional form,’ adopted as the primary form in research literature, is the precision with which it is able to express an intended proposition. Some suggest, however, that the impotence of ‘propositional’ form to address the fuller

Propositional knowing may be distinguished from other kinds of knowing. Propositional knowing takes the form of knowing that *p* (where *p* is a proposition). There is also *practical* knowledge—knowing how to do *x*, which just means being *capable* of doing *x*. There is *experiential* knowledge or the knowledge of acquaintance whereby one is familiar with *x*. The personal knowing we have discussed could be considered a special kind of experiential knowing. It is significant to note that practical, experiential and personal knowledge can and usually do have *propositional content*. Practical, experiential or personal knowledge is accompanied by propositional knowledge about the object that is known practically, experientially or personally. The relationship between propositional knowing and other kinds of knowing is complex.<sup>44</sup> Growing in propositional knowledge is often a means to growing in other kinds of knowledge. Growing in other kinds of knowledge often involves the discovery of new propositional knowledge. *Belief* also has more than one sense. Belief as a component of propositional knowledge indicates assent to the truth of a proposition—*belief that p*. Belief that indicates trust in or submission to something or someone takes the form of *belief in x*. Each of these distinctions regarding belief, knowledge, propositions and their means of expression will be important for avoiding ambiguity as we now pick up where we left off with Barth.

### *Barth and Propositional Knowing*

We have already confirmed that, for Barth, revelation is principally personal divine self-disclosure. Revelation, therefore, cannot be *reduced* to propositions.<sup>45</sup> This leaves

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dimensions of knowing can so impede successful communication of meaning that other means of expressing propositions are, in fact, superior. Kevin Vanhoozer, for example, suggests that “fixation on sentence-long statements only fails to do justice to the particularity and plurality of the Bible’s diverse literary forms because certain aspects of meaning, and reality, emerge only under certain literary frameworks of description” (“The Apostolic Discourse and Its Developments,” in *Scripture’s Doctrine and Theology’s Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*, eds. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming 2008]).

<sup>44</sup> This complexity is compounded by other non-cognitive dimensions which directly impact knowledge structures. The interconnectedness of the affective and the cognitive is commonly acknowledged. See *WCB*, 205–209, 301–310.

<sup>45</sup> On the question of whether revelation can be equated with doctrinal propositions, Barth’s view is clear. “Will the truth of revelation submit to such materialisation and depersonalisation? Can one have it in

open the question of whether, in Barth's view, revelation has propositional content that is in some way available to human subjects. Does revelation as personal knowing eclipse the propositional? Does Barth believe that revelation is indifferent to propositional content, or merely that the propositional content of faith cannot be known outside of the gift of personal divine self-revealing? It may be helpful to look at some of Barth's sterner warnings regarding propositions (*Sätze*).

The concept of truths of revelation in the sense of Latin propositions given and sealed once for all with divine authority in both wording and meaning is theologically impossible if it is a fact that revelation is true in the free decision of God which was taken once for all in Jesus Christ.<sup>46</sup>

we cannot view [revelation] in such a way that propositions may be taken from it which, isolated from the giving of God's Word in revelation, Scripture and proclamation, can be known as general truths by man, . . . so that they for their part can then be made—and this is the decisive point—the presupposition of an understanding of God's Word or the basis of theology.<sup>47</sup>

It is for this reason and in this sense that we finally speak of the Word of God as the mystery of God. . . . as one might put it, a theological warning against theology, a warning against the idea that its propositions or principles are certain in themselves like the supposed axioms of the mathematicians and physicists, and are not rather related to their theme and content, which alone are certain, which they cannot master, by which they must be mastered if they are not to be mere soap-bubbles.<sup>48</sup>

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abstraction from the person of Him who reveals it and from the revelatory act of this person in which it is given to other persons to perceive?" (*CD* I/1, 270; *KD* I/1, 285).

<sup>46</sup> *CD* I/1, 15 (*KD* I/1, 14). Barth is not suggesting that the truth of what is revealed is relative to God's decision to reveal it, rather than absolute, anchored in the reality of the object of revelation. It is rather that God's decision to reveal is part of who God is, as the object of revelation. God is also his revealing.

<sup>47</sup> *CD* I/1, 130 (*KD* I/1, 134).

<sup>48</sup> *CD* I/1, 165 (*KD* I/1, 171).

These are strong warnings, yet rather than supporting the conclusion that revelation has *no* propositional content, propositional content is assumed and given a strict qualification. Barth's apparent anxiety about propositions is directed at a view of revelation as the lossless transmission of divine data in self-contained human statements. In each instance, his intent is to highlight the utter incapacity of human words, conceptions and noetic equipment to contain the personal revelation of God. We must remember, however, that in the miracle of faith this incapacity is overcome. Having remembered this, we must not forget that even the propositional content of revelation remains ever dependent on the gracious action of divine self-disclosure—the gift of faith. It may be illuminating to consider how this might proceed for a particular proposition—one which would traditionally be considered a revealed 'truth.'

Consider the proposition Plantinga often returns to, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself."<sup>49</sup> How might grasping this proposition be related to Barth's notion of revelation, such that, on the one hand, it constitutes a genuine human grasp of the proposition, while on the other hand, it remains fundamentally dependent on the personal knowing of faith? Throughout this analysis it will be important to keep in mind the difference between a proposition and its means of expression. The way in which the proposition in question is expressed may, of course, vary. The appropriateness of the expression will depend on a multitude of situational variables. Perhaps one hears a sermon that explicitly addresses the sentence 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself' or, what may be more likely, one encounters a presentation of the Gospel narrative that expresses the proposition in question and many others. The question is: How might one be given a grasp of this proposition which is a genuine human grasp and also derivative of the faith-giving activity of the Spirit?

Consider again what is involved in grasping a proposition. The strength of one's grasp of a proposition is dependent upon how clearly one apprehends the subject, predicate, and the nature of the predication involved. There may be many ways in which one comes to acquire a new or strengthened apprehension of these things—through experience, inference, testimony, etc. There are also different ways of apprehending a proposition. It is possible to have no prior knowledge of a subject and still apprehend a proposition in a certain sense. Take for example the proposition expressed by the sentence 'Newg is unhappy today'. One might have no other knowledge of *Newg* and still firmly apprehend

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<sup>49</sup> WCB, 7, 36, 42, 56, 105, 244, 250, 260, 261, 267, 331, 376, 378–9, 448, 454.

that *Newg* has the property of *being unhappy today*. There is a difficulty with this, however. What is meant by the expression ‘being unhappy today’ depends, in part, on the nature of the thing about which it is expressed. Think of the difference it would make if *Newg* were an amoeba, a tropical storm, a personal computer, or a new-born baby. We can see, therefore, that the stronger one’s apprehension of the realities involved the better one’s grasp of a proposition about them.

Now let us consider what it takes to have a relatively strong grasp of the proposition that *God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself*. If we are correct in what we have said so far, it requires a relatively strong apprehension of what is being expressed by the proper names ‘God,’ and ‘Christ,’ as well as what is meant by ‘reconciling,’ etc. Where might we turn to find greater clarity about these realities? Principally, Barth suggests, this clarification comes through God’s own transforming work of self-revelation through the witness of the Bible and the proclamation of the Church. In Christian scripture and preaching, however, we find more expressions in human words which are used together in an attempt to clarify what those expressions intend. The problem, which is for Barth patent, is that all those words are never adequate, by themselves, to give a sufficient grasp of the reality referred to by the proper names ‘God’ and ‘Christ.’ Certainly one can become competent in using the words, and still lack a basic understanding of and familiarity with the realities to which they refer. Plantinga has a great deal to offer in navigating the subtleties involved with proper names, real referents, and propositional utterances. Of particular assistance on this issue is the extremely helpful distinction Plantinga draws between *de dicto* and *de re* belief.<sup>50</sup>

### *De Dicto Assertion and De Re Belief*

Plantinga’s primary deployment of the *de dicto/de re* distinction is in discussions of modality where *de re* and *de dicto* distinguish two kinds of necessity.<sup>51</sup> *De dicto* necessity applies to a *dictum*—that is, to the abstract proposition. *De re* necessity applies to the *res*—that is, to the individual realities referred to by the abstract proposition. This same distinction can also be applied to distinguish two kinds of belief. *De dicto* belief affirms

<sup>50</sup> “A competent speaker could use his words to assert a proposition of which he has only an inchoate grasp or even no grasp at all” (“Replies to My Colleagues,” 357).

<sup>51</sup> See “De Re et De Dicto,” *Noûs* 3, no. 3 (1969): 235–258. For the distinction in Aquinas, see *Summa Theologica*, I.2.1.

the truth of the abstract proposition. *De re* belief affirms, of that to which the proposition refers, what is ascribed to it by the proposition. This is a subtle, but enormously consequential distinction. We can illustrate the distinction formally if we consider the proposition expressed by ‘*a* is *x*.’ *De dicto* belief affirms the abstract assignment of the property *x* to *a*. Believing *de dicto* of ‘*a*’ that it has the property *x* may involve knowing little else about the reality referred to by *a*. *De re* belief affirms that *x* is true of the actual reality referred to by *a*. *De re* belief is always of some specific ‘concrete’ reality. This formal illustration struggles to give us a clear conception of *de re* belief because *a* is itself a pure abstraction with no specific reference. Let us take, therefore, a somewhat far-fetched, though much more concrete example.

Consider the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘the fastest typing ventriloquist in the world is performing tonight in St Andrews.’ One need not know exactly who is the fastest typing ventriloquist in the world to believe that there is a fastest typing ventriloquist and that he or she is performing tonight in St Andrews. This would be to believe *de dicto* of ‘the fastest typing ventriloquist in the world’ that he or she is performing tonight in St Andrews. Suppose, however, that the fastest typing ventriloquist in the world is actually my close friend and colleague Kelly D. Liebengood. This would enable me to believe *de re* of Kelly both that he is the fastest typing ventriloquist in the world and that he is performing his act tonight in St Andrews. We could, perhaps, take an illustration that is right at the heart of our broader concern. Consider the proposition expressed by ‘God is omniscient.’<sup>52</sup> One may assert this proposition *de dicto*. One may form the *de dicto* belief with respect to the proper name ‘God’ that it stands for a thing that has the property of omniscience. One may also form the *de re* belief of God, the personal being to which ‘God’ refers, that *he* has the property of omniscience.<sup>53</sup> *De re* belief, therefore, seems to require some knowing contact with the real referent(s) of the proposition. Since God’s knowledge of himself is perfect, he is in the best position to form *de re* beliefs about himself with respect to true propositions referring to him. Furthermore, Jesus Christ as God incarnate, the Son who knows the Father, stands in a

<sup>52</sup> See *WCB*, 293, where Plantinga considers the *de dicto* assertion that ‘there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, wholly good person who has created and sustains the world.’

<sup>53</sup> “. . . the theist believes that there is such a being, but also, no doubt, believes of God, the being who in fact meets this description, that he exists. It isn’t necessary, however, that he does the latter; perhaps he forms the *de dicto* belief but never performs the *de re* act of believing something or other of the being in question” (*WCB*, 293–294).

unique position with respect to *human* knowledge of God. In Christ we find God's *human* knowledge of himself.

It is clear that, for Barth, genuine human knowledge of God that comes by the self-revealing Word of God in the gift of faith involves not merely *de dicto* assertion, but *de re* belief. This gives us another way of framing our question regarding the propositional content of revelation. According to Barth, how is it that God's self-disclosure enables human knowing to transcend the *de dicto*, yielding warranted *de re* belief? We are now ready to tackle three, very much interconnected, nodal issues for coming to grips with Barth's theology of revelation. We will treat them in the following order: 1) the hiddenness of God, 2) the problem of analogical predication, and 3) the significance of *historical* knowledge.

## ***Hiddenness, Analogy and History***

### *The Hiddenness of God Revisited*

As eluded to in chapter 1, the hiddenness of God, for Barth, is neither an *a priori* assumption nor a demonstrable truth. The conviction that human language, conceptuality and noetic equipment are insufficient for arriving at a knowledge of God is only known in the light of the knowledge of God. "Even knowledge of the impossibility of knowledge of the Word of God outside its reality is possible only on the presupposition of this real knowledge."<sup>54</sup> This is significant for our discussion in at least two ways. Firstly, here we have another clear example of Barth affirming that the event of revelation has propositional content. The proposition that *human language, conceptuality and noetic equipment are insufficient for arriving at a knowledge of God* is a revealed 'truth.' This very proposition is grasped on the basis of God's having overcome the insufficiency of human language, conceptuality and noetic equipment.

Secondly, the fact that Barth does not posit the hiddenness of God as a demonstrable presupposition keeps him from internal incoherence and direct conflict with Plantinga. One of the *de jure* objections to theistic belief that Plantinga dismantles is the argument that the existence of God is not something that could be known by human beings because human concepts cannot apply to God. At the heart of Plantinga's critique is the

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<sup>54</sup> CD I/1, 197 (KD I/1, 206, "Auch die Erkenntnis der Unmöglichkeit der Erkenntnis des Wortes Gottes außerhalb ihrer Wirklichkeit ist nur möglich unter Voraussetzung dieser wirklichen Erkenntnis").



observation that to suggest that human concepts cannot apply to God is to apply at least one human concept to God.<sup>55</sup> It is also important to see that Barth never claims that human concepts *cannot* apply to God. What Barth claims is that human concepts are inadequate to deliver the fullness of what it is to know God.<sup>56</sup> For Barth, the knowledge of God must be *de re* not merely *de dicto*. What makes reference to God possible is not a capacity latent in human concepts.

The Bible, the Church and theology undoubtedly speak this language on the presupposition that there might be something in it, namely, that in this language God's revelation might be referred to, witness might be given, God's Word might be proclaimed, dogma might be formulated and declared. The only question is whether this possibility is to be understood as that of the language and consequently of the world or man, or whether it is to be regarded as a venture which is, as it were, ascribed to the language, and consequently to the world or man, from without, so that it is not really the possibility of the language, the world, or man, but the possibility of revelation.<sup>57</sup>

How does this help us with our question about the propositional content of revelation and the wider question of what constitutes a genuine knowledge of God for Barth? Firstly, it reaffirms the fact that for Barth there is indeed propositional content to revelation, the propositional content of revelation depends on a gracious divine enabling, and the creaturely form God enables to serve as the means of revelation may itself be an expression of propositions. We have also established that genuine knowledge of God for Barth must give us real reference to God, *de re* knowledge. Minimally this must entail that in the gift of faith what is meant by the proper name 'God' is personally revealed. We should be careful, however, what conclusions we draw from this. One is tempted to

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<sup>55</sup> "One who makes the claim seems to set up a certain subject for predication—God—and then declare that our concepts do not apply to this being. But if this is so, then, presumably, at least one of our concepts—being such that our concepts don't apply to it—does apply to this being" (*WCB*, 6). See also *WCB*, 38.

<sup>56</sup> Barth asks in his lectures on ethics, "Does man really know God when he admittedly does not know him totally, in his nature, as the Lord in the pregnant and comprehensive biblical sense of the term?" *Eet*, 31 (*EI*, 49).

<sup>57</sup> *CD* I/1, 339 (*KD* I/1, 358).

suggest that the knowledge of faith is the knowledge of religious experience,<sup>58</sup> such that how one knows God is principally by reference to an experience or memory of an experience of God. On this view, one's grasp of a proposition about God is dependent on understanding that the proper name 'God' refers to *the one who I religiously experience*. One difficulty with this is the implication that the religious experience is numinous, that is, utterly non-propositional. This simply is not Barth's view.<sup>59</sup> God's personal revealing is inextricably connected to the propositions expressed in the medium of revelation. God's Word is speech, it is experienced *as* it is heard.<sup>60</sup> The knowledge of God by faith (at least in the paradigmatic instances) puts us in contact with the real referent *by means of* human language, despite the inadequacies of human language and human cognition.<sup>61</sup> This means that the *de re* knowledge of the real referent of the proper name 'God' given in revelation is not independent of a clarified apprehension of the other elements of linguistic description, particularly predicates and predications.<sup>62</sup> This brings us to the second of three nodal issues—the problem of analogical predication.

<sup>58</sup> Barth was cautious in his use of the term 'religious experience' (CD I/1, 193; KD I/1, 201).

<sup>59</sup> Barth emphasizes that, while revelation is rightly construed as an experience (*Erfahrung*) of the Word of God, it is an experience which impacts all 'anthropological centres'—'intellect' as well as 'feeling' and 'conscience' (CD I/1, 202–203; KD I/1, 211–212).

<sup>60</sup> Some parallels can be found in William Alston's view of the relationship between beliefs about God's activity and an experiential awareness of that activity. See "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," in *Faith and Rationality*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); and, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>61</sup> As stressed in Chapter 2, Barth is no Kantian with respect to *pure reason*. No doubt his thinking about cognition is shaped by Kant, but for Barth a cognitive human knowledge of the noumenal God is a real possibility thanks to God. Barth rejects Kant in explicitly Kantian terms when he says that the initiating divine action in faith generates a corresponding authentic and clear human knowing, from "intuitive apprehension to [linguistically] formulated comprehension" CD I/1, 12 (KD I/1, 11, "vom intuitiven Ergreifen bis zum sprachlich formulierenden Begreifen"). For Kant, the futility of a cognitive knowledge of God is a function of his being that which lies beyond our sensibility and understanding. See especially book II, chapter iii of the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan Press, 1920), 485–531.

<sup>62</sup> Trevor Hart draws the parallel to Christ's humanity. Though there is no "co-mingling of the divine and the creaturely which presents the divine to us immediately," there also can be no "docetic indifference to the humanity of the Lord," whose "life, death and resurrection constitute the primary objective locus or site of God's self-revealing" (*Regarding Karl Barth*, 185; "Revelation," 52). So also, "God defines himself for us, assuming our words and conceptuality just as surely as he assumes our flesh in order to

*The Problem of Analogical Predication*

The way in which human language and concepts are said to refer to God is neither univocally nor equivocally, but analogically. Most relatively orthodox theologians agree on this. When it comes to analogical predication, however, the devil is in the details.<sup>63</sup>

One's grasp of what is predicated in a proposition typically relies, in part, on generalizing from previous knowledge based on direct or indirect experience. If I assert that *Dabgib likes flowers*, one's grasp of my assertion will involve picking out of the range of what it means to *like flowers* the sense or senses in which I mean to predicate *liking flowers* of *Dabgib*. As it stands the assertion is rather ambiguous. It would be much less ambiguous were I to specify the sense of *liking flowers* I mean with the addition of 'as is common to all herbaceous dinosaurs' or 'just like any useful bumble-bee.' Grasping my assertion would then usually involve making an appropriate generalization from one's previous knowledge of what is typical of herbaceous beasts or bees. If this is a straight forward instance, my predication is univocal. I mean to assert that *liking flowers* applies to *Dabgib* in exactly the same way it applies to a general class of beings. Of course, I could be equivocating, prevaricating or simply being sarcastic. I might also employ a figure of speech, as in *Dabgib likes to stop and smell the roses*. It is possible that *Dabgib* actually despises the smell of roses. In this case the predicate applies to *Dabgib* metaphorically.<sup>64</sup> There is a relation of some kind between what is literally predicated and what is actually predicated. In the way that some like to stop and smell roses, *Dabgib* likes to deviate from a regimented schedule to appreciate life's *ad hoc* gifts. What applies to *Dabgib* is a similarity shared with the predicate. Picking out the kind of relation that is intended is, like other communication skills, dependent on a complexity of environmentally conditioned rules and assumptions which structure human discourse within particular contexts. What is significant to notice, is that even in cases of analogical predication, grasping what is predicated typically involves drawing the appropriate

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reveal himself, and yet doing so in such a way that it never lies within our grasp to cash out the metaphors in literal terms, any more than we can capture the eternal Son simply by analysing the humanness of the historical Jesus" (*Regarding Karl Barth*, 194).

<sup>63</sup> Barth's words are infamous: "I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of Antichrist" (*CD* I/1, xiii; *KD* I/1, viii).

<sup>64</sup> For our purposes, we not need be detained at this point with the distinction between analogy and metaphor. Cf. Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 39-51.

generalization. Whether univocally or analogically predicated, predication involves situating something with respect to generalizations drawn from existing beliefs or experience.

Barth sees that merely stipulating that reference to God is analogical is not sufficient to safeguard against the critique of Feuerbach. If our knowledge of God is finally derived from generalizations and extrapolations of relations to human phenomena then we have simply projected a 'God' in our own image. A knowledge of God originating *from below* cannot escape anthropomorphism. These concerns, which were at the forefront of Barth's rejection of natural theology, also drive his rejection of an *analogia entis*.<sup>65</sup> As Barth understood it, an *analogia entis* suggests that the being of God can be subsumed under a general category of being which applies to all beings thus providing an analogical basis for a human knowledge of God.<sup>66</sup> On this view, the power of analogical predication to communicate truths about God resides in the suitability of the human knower's prior knowledge and experience to provide a noetic bridge according to a particular analogical relation. For Barth, this is as good as having no hope whatsoever of knowing God.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> It has been well established that the notion of the *analogia entis* Barth so strongly criticized was not, in fact, held by Aquinas. While Aquinas affirms an *analogia entis* (ST I.4.3) and suggests that human language for God is analogical (ST I.13.10), it is far from clear that his notion of the *analogia entis* provides the basis for a 'natural' knowledge of God. We find, furthermore, that for Aquinas the Holy Spirit bestows the natural light (ST I-II.109.1). An extremely illuminating discussion of Aquinas and Barth on the question of analogical predication is found in Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 127–203. For other comparisons of Barth and Aquinas on analogy see Henri Chavannes, *L'Analogie entre Dieu et le Monde Selon Saint Thomas d'Aquin et Selon Karl Barth*, *Cogitatio Fidei*, 42 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969), Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), and, Albert Patfoort "Vers une réconciliation entre saint Thomas et Karl Barth" *Angelicum* 48 (1971): 226–232.

<sup>66</sup> The *analogia entis* is construed "as an analogy that can be surveyed and perceived, as an analogy that can be understood in a synthesis from an onlooker's standpoint." It posits "a being which the creature has in common with the Creator," resulting finally in "a deification of man" (CD I/1, 239; KD I/1, 252).

<sup>67</sup> "The question: What is God's Word? is utterly hopeless [*völlig hoffnungslos*] if it is the question as to the category in which God's Word is to be put or the syllogism by which it might be proved. Questions of category and syllogism obviously presuppose that the Word of God is one of the realities that are universally present and ascertainable and therefore created. All concepts tending in this direction, even that of a supreme being, an *ens perfectissimum* or an unconditioned, even that of the breaking through and knowledge of such a supreme being, are not as such—as general concepts—the concept of the Word of God. As general concepts, they suppress the essential point that the Word of God is a reality only in its own decision. The fact that the Word of God is decision means that there is no concept of the Word of

Given the freedom and uniqueness of God, analogical predication of this sort requires two earth-shattering moves on the part of the human knower. The first is having *a priori* possession of knowledge and experience which may serve as a suitable analogue. The second is being able to discern precisely the analogical relation—perceiving the exact boundaries of the sense in which the analogy holds.

Is Barth's rejection of an *analogia entis* equivalent to the rejection of any reference to God by means of analogical predication? Do all forms of analogy run aground on the shoals of anthropomorphism? Barth seems to concede that some form of analogy is the only option standing between the extremes of univocation and equivocation. Barth categorically denies that human language and conceptions apply univocally to God; and, he just as vociferously affirms that, by grace, human language can transcend mere equivocation. What Barth rejects is not analogy, but the presumption that a human potency enables its success. The problem arises when the power of analogical reference to God is "ascribed to the language, and consequently to the world or man, *from without*."<sup>68</sup>

The kind of analogy which is operative in revelation is not an *analogia entis* but the *analogia fidei*.<sup>69</sup> The critical difference is that, in the gift of faith, the power enabling the success of the analogical predication is the grace of God's own self-revealing. This means that, rather than relying on an *a priori* grasp of the analogue and a human perception of the precise range and sense of the analogical relation, God himself provides cognitively what human knowers cannot provide themselves. This involves a reversing of the epistemic relationship between subject and object that has tacitly informed all of our illustrations up to this point. Rather than starting with the noetic capacities and preconditions of the human knower, revelation proceeds—yes, *by means of* the analogy—but according to the self-interpreting priority of the object of knowing, the real referent God. Genuine human knowledge of God does not begin with a human grasp but with God grasping the human by means of an encounter with the Word of God, which results in a

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God apart from the name of God, which we love and fear and worship because it is identical with the Bearer of the name" (CD I/1, 158–159; KD I/1, 164).

<sup>68</sup> Quoted at length above, CD I/1, 339 (KD I/1, 358); emphasis mine.

<sup>69</sup> "Our reply to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the *analogia entis* is not, then, a denial of the concept of analogy. We say rather that the analogy in question is not an *analogia entis* but according to Rom. 12<sup>6</sup> the *ἀναλογία τῆς πίστεως*" (CD I/1, 243; KD I/1, 257).

corresponding human grasp.<sup>70</sup> Barth explains the *analogia fidei* in light of Galatians 4:8, where the priority of being known by God establishes a Christian knowledge of God.<sup>71</sup> This has a decisive impact on how we conceive of the propositional content of revelation.

Let us consider how this goes for specific analogues, for instance, our expression of God in Christ ‘reconciling’ the world, or the seemingly more straightforward ascriptions of God as ‘father,’ or even simply ‘person.’ No matter how much additional description we pile on to clarify the analogy from the disanalogy between God and our own prior knowledge and experience of mundane reconciling, fathers and persons, we can never lift ourselves out of the limitations inherent in human language, particularly in light of the sinfulness of the human condition and the freedom of God. Overcoming this problem, Barth believes, requires a reversal of the movement from mundane knowledge to divine knowledge. Barth’s expression, encountered earlier, is again apposite here, “the power of this reference does not lie in itself; it lies in that to which it refers.”<sup>72</sup> What anchors the analogical reference cannot be a conception of the mundane analogue, but the active roll taken by the object of knowing to illumine himself in the reference.<sup>73</sup> The analogue is commandeered and filled out by the referent. The object of knowing assumes epistemic priority over the human preconceptions and experience associated with the reference. The reconciliation, fatherhood and personhood of God becomes paradigmatic reconciliation, fatherhood and personhood. The mundane notions become derivative of the uniquely divine and thus paradigmatic instantiations. For Barth, this is the only solution to the

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<sup>70</sup> “. . .not therefore that man has grasped at the Bible but that the Bible has grasped at man” (CD I/1, 110; KD I/1, 113).

<sup>71</sup> “This *analogia fidei* is also the point of the remarkable passages in Paul in which man’s knowledge of God is inverted into man’s being known by God. Paul calls Christians *γνόντες θεόν* only to amend it at once: *μᾶλλον δὲ γνωσθέντες ὑπὸ θεοῦ*. It is obviously this *γνωσθῆναι* that distinguishes their *γινώσκειν* as Christians from their previous non-knowing of God as pagans (Gal. 4<sup>8f</sup>)” (CD I/1, 244; KD I/1, 257).

<sup>72</sup> CD I/1, 197 (KD I/1, 205, “Die Kraft dieses Verweises liegt nicht in ihm selber, sondern in dem, worauf er verweist”).

<sup>73</sup> Jay Wesley Richards rightly identifies Barth’s commitment to God’s action in revelation as the motivation for his rejection of an *analogia entis* and an intrinsic *analogia attributionis* (*The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Immutability and Simplicity* [Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003], 124).

problem of anthropomorphism. He therefore quips, “the doubtful thing is not whether God is person, but whether we are.”<sup>74</sup>

We can now see with greater clarity why, for Barth, one cannot separate the question of the propositional or cognitive content of revelation from the personal and transformative character of revelation, which together constitute a *genuine* human knowledge of God. In the *analogia fidei* human noetic structures and linguistic forms are reconciled (though not yet redeemed) by the Spirit of God so that we may grasp the propositions feebly, though properly and non-arbitrarily, expressed in human language by receiving a *de re* knowledge of the referent, God. This also means that, for Barth, any successful reference to God or communication about God that counts as or results in a genuine human knowledge of God must always be *by faith*—that is, it must involve the free gift of active, personal, transformative divine self-disclosure. It is not possible, having been revealed to propositionally, to come as it were back down the mountain with those propositions in hand to conceive and speak of God outside of his presence and very present active self-revealing.<sup>75</sup> Of course this is not a reason to despair, but merely a reminder of our faithful hope and confident dependence on his grace.

As always, much more can be said about the nature of this transformative self-revealing. We may be guilty in this section of seeming to approach the question of propositional content as if such knowing were highly theoretical, abstract and individualistic. We have said very little here to recall discussions in chapter 4 of the importance of broader environmental factors, particularly what we, in Planting’s terms, referred to as the Spirit’s engendering of conducive ecclesial cognitive environments.<sup>76</sup> We have also, up to now, given relatively little explicit attention to the relevance of the historical dimension of the knowledge of God. This brings us to the third of three interconnected, nodal issues, which I have suggested are essential to understanding Barth’s idea of the character of genuine human knowing and its relation to propositional content. In our discussion of the first two issues, the hiddenness of God and analogical predication, we established that Barth unambiguously affirms propositional content as a

<sup>74</sup> CD I/1, 138 (KD I/1, 143, “Nicht das ist problematisch, ob Gott Person ist, sondern das ist problematisch, ob wir es sind”).

<sup>75</sup> As Trevor Hart puts it, we cannot “climb up the vapour trails left by the divine descent, and find our way to heaven” (*Regarding Karl Barth*, 192).

<sup>76</sup> For a fuller and far richer exploration of ecclesial, doxological and semantic participation and transformation in revelation see Alan Torrance’s *tour de force*, *Persons in Communion*.

key element of revelation by faith in which God transforms human conceptions and language to give a *de re* knowledge of himself through propositional expression. Now we turn to the significance of the not merely abstract, but *historical* nature of divine self-disclosure.

*The Significance of the Historical Character of Divine Self-Revealing*

Barth maintains that the Word of God is indivisible from God's concrete action in history.<sup>77</sup>

The distinction between word and act is that mere word is the mere self-expression of a person, while act is the resultant relative alteration in the world around. Mere word is passive, act is an active participation in history. But this kind of distinction does not apply to the Word of God. As mere Word it is act. As mere Word it is the divine person, the person of the Lord of history, whose self-expression is as such an alteration, and indeed an absolute alteration of the world, whose *passio* in history is as such *actio*. What God does when He speaks, in exactly the same way as what He says, cannot, of course, be generally defined either by way of anticipation or by that of reproduction. We can refer only to the *concretissima* of the acts which are attested in the Bible and which are also to be expected from God in the future.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> For Pannenberg, grasping the historical character of revelation requires that one jettison Barth's notion of revelation as Word of God and as the self-revelation of God. Like Barth, Pannenberg wants to avoid the conclusion that revelation is handed over in complete, self-contained truths. The alternative for Pannenberg is to see that until the consummation of history, revelation remains provisional. For Barth, however, what enables the self-revelation of God as a truly successful, through irreducibly historical, speech-act, is not a completeness of the medium, but the gracious decision of God to draw human knowers, by the gift of faith, into an historical participation in Christ's knowledge of the Father through a verbal encounter with God's self-disclosure in history. Pannenberg draws the unfortunate conclusion that Barth's position is fundamentally Hegelian and unravels into a denial of the possibility of mediated revelation. See Pannenberg's "Einführung" to *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg, 3. Aufl. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 7–11.

<sup>78</sup> CD I/1, 144 (KD I/1, 149).



There are at least two inseparable though distinguishable senses in which, for Barth, the revealed knowledge of God is *historical*—two ways in which revelation is act. Revelation is historical in that it is simultaneously act that reveals and revelation that acts. It is historical in character with respect both to the acts of revelation proper and to the subsequent acts of witness to revelation. Barth, consequently, differentiates the historical concreteness of revelation into three ‘times’ according to his threefold form of the Word. There is, firstly, the time of revelation proper, what Barth calls “the time of the direct, original speech of God Himself in His revelation, the time of Jesus Christ (which was also and already that of Abraham according to Jn. 8:56).”<sup>79</sup> The time of the witness given by the prophets and apostles is the second time, the time of the composition of Scripture. The third time is the time of the witness of the Church, “the time of derivative proclamation related to the words of the prophets and apostles and regulated by them.”<sup>80</sup> Revelation is temporally located without being temporally constrained.<sup>81</sup>

Another way of getting at what I am calling the inseparable though distinguishable twofold nature of the historical character of revelation is to think in terms of the distinction between the *content* of revelation and the *reception* of revelation. As we saw above, what it means for revelation to be concretely historical is that the speech of God, the act of God, involves “an absolute alteration of the world.” The *content* of the knowledge of revelation, therefore, is knowledge of God in his absolute world-alteration, which is *received* by human knowers only by God’s radical alteration of their world.<sup>82</sup> This is to say that there is an overlap between what it means that revelation is *historical* and all that we have already said about revelation being *transformative*. The work of the

<sup>79</sup> CD I/1, 145 (KD I/1, 150, “die Zeit der direkten ursprünglichen Rede Gottes selbst in seiner Offenbarung, die Zeit Jesu Christi”).

<sup>80</sup> CD I/1, 145 (KD I/1, 150, “die Zeit der abgeleiteten, auf die Worte der Propheten und Apostel bezogenen und durch sie normierten Verkündigung”).

<sup>81</sup> James A. Veitch makes the untenable assertion that, in Barth’s view, revelation “never participates in world history.” The relationship between revelation and history he far better expresses as revelation’s being located “in time” without being “relativised by the historical process” (“Revelation and Religion in Karl Barth,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 24, no. 1 [1971]: 3–4).

<sup>82</sup> This radical alteration is the New Testament notion of *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*)—as Murray Rae describes: “variously translated in the English New Testament as ‘repentance’ or ‘conversion’, the conjunction of *meta* and *nous* means literally, ‘a change of mind’, but is employed by the New Testament writers to suggest a profound transformation of the whole person” (*Kierkegaard’s Vision of the Incarnation: By Faith Transformed* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 115; cf. CD I/1, 387 [KD I/1, 408]).

Spirit in human knowers to “open up man and make him capable and ready for Himself, and thus achieve His revelation in him”<sup>83</sup> is a concrete world-altering historical act. What human knowers are opened up to is God in his world-altering action. This distinction, therefore, is nothing more than the indivisible way in which God becomes both object and subject for us in his revelation.<sup>84</sup>

What are the implications of this twofold historical character of revelation for our discussion of revelation’s propositional content and expression? I am suggesting that we have already given some attention to the subjective or receptive nature of God’s speech as action, but we have not considered what it means for the content of revelation, and therefore the propositions of revelation, to be fundamentally historical in character. Consider again the expression: ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.’ In our discussion thus far of what it would mean to have a genuine human grasp of the proposition expressed by means of this expression, we have treated the notions of reference, analogy and *de re* belief in more or less abstract terms. For Barth, however, the knowledge of God is never a knowledge of God’s essence in abstraction from his acts in human history.<sup>85</sup> Who God is is who God has made himself known to be in Jesus Christ.

But who is the Lord and therefore the God to whom the Bible is referring?  
As we have seen already, it is typical of the Bible in both the Old  
Testament and the New that its answer to this question does not point us

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<sup>83</sup> CD I/1, 450 (KD I/1, 473, “den Menschen für sich selbst öffnen, bereit und fähig machen und so seine Offenbarung an ihm vollstrecken kann”).

<sup>84</sup> With reference to Bonhoeffer, Paul Janz critiques the positivist tendencies in Barth’s notion of revelation as act. He charges that the result of Barth’s position is that God remains ‘non-objective’ resulting in a “basic loss of rational integrity.” This clash with reason comes when Barth tries to maintain that “in revelation God both ‘posits’ himself as a possible referent of rational discourse or thinking, and yet does so while contradictorily (and therefore ‘miraculously’) remaining entirely immune from the intrinsic obligations of the very rational discourse into which revelation posits itself” (*God, the Mind’s Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 118–120). Janz never demonstrates the contradiction in Barth, but more significantly, he fails to grasp that the whole purpose of God’s action of bringing the human knowing subject into a participation in God’s self-knowing is to enable not the contradiction of reason but the true miracle of an objective human knowledge of God.

<sup>85</sup> “This ‘God with us’ has happened. It has happened in human history and as a part of human history” (CD I/1, 116; KD I/1, 119).

primarily to a sphere beyond human history but rather to the very centre of this history.<sup>86</sup>

This means that all of our inquiries into the real reference of expressions used in the communication of revelation by faith finally come to rest upon Jesus Christ—not an abstract *logos asarkos* but the incarnate Christ of human history. This confirms what we noted earlier, that a *de re* knowledge of God cannot merely consist of a subjective, back-stage, numinous encounter. To know what it means that God has the property of being the one who ‘reconciles the world to himself,’ involves thicker description of the concrete reconciling of the incarnation in his life, death, resurrection and ascension.<sup>87</sup> The way in which the Spirit transforms human concepts and language will be by means of exposure to this history and not in abstraction from it. As we have stressed all along, for Barth, the knowledge of God is not reducible to propositions, nor is an apprehension of the acts of God equivalent to having access to a specific historical dataset. It does mean, however, that the propositional content of revelation has this irreducibly historical character in both reference and expression.

The obvious consequence of this is that genuine human knowledge of God in the full sense we have been considering from Barth involves knowledge of and therefore belief in historical details. Minimally, some grasp of and belief in the historical actuality of the incarnation seems to be required.<sup>88</sup> Plantinga explicitly references affirmations of the incarnation, suffering, death and resurrection of Christ as key components of Christian belief.<sup>89</sup> It is critical to see, however, that the way in which these beliefs have warrant is,

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<sup>86</sup> CD I/1, 384 (KD I/1, 405).

<sup>87</sup> Though Barth is not expressly referenced, in a discussion of what it might mean for theological propositions to be true, Robert Jenson echoes Barth’s thoughts on revelation and history when he asserts that “accounts of reality other than the biblical story are abstractions from the full account of what we actually inhabit, that is, they are abstractions from the story of God with his creatures.” He laments that, for theology, “the fact of the Incarnation has made far too little difference; most of what we say could equally well be said if God’s *Logos* were that immaterial mirror and Jesus simply a great prophet or rabbi—or beach-boy guru” (“What If It Were True?,” *CTI Reflections* 4 [2001]: 7, 15).

<sup>88</sup> Barth laments the ‘blind alley’ of Docetic Christology, which abstracts the ‘idea’ of Jesus from history. “The fact that the manifestation of this idea was seen in Jesus of Nazareth was more or less accidental and indifferent, so indifferent that the concrete humanity of His earthly existence, or finally even its historical reality, could be queried” (CD I/1, 403; KD I/1, 423).

<sup>89</sup> WCB, vii, 117, 180, 205, 241, 243, 270, 285, 357, 374.

for both Barth and Plantinga, not finally on the basis of inference from historical research and human testimony.<sup>90</sup> Witness to this history is the principle means by which we are, by the Spirit, given a grasp of its truth. It is the ministry of the Spirit in the gift of faith and not the historical propositions themselves which is their proof. Barth and Plantinga agree, furthermore, that this remains the case even for eyewitnesses.<sup>91</sup> Even at the interface between Barth's first two 'times', when the prophets and apostles were confronted by the direct and original speech-act of God, hearing was by the gift of faith in the work of the Spirit.<sup>92</sup>

This concludes our cursory sketch of the key facets of Barth's notion of the genuine human knowledge of God given by the Spirit in the gift of faith. We have established that the propositional content and character of revelation is fundamental to revelation, though derivative of the personal encounter with God wherein human knowers are given a participation in the risen Christ's knowledge of the Father by the Spirit. We have seen the impact of the transformational character of God's concrete speech-act which enables real reference to God, i.e. *de re* belief, by liberating earth-bound preconceptions, allowing the object of knowing to recondition human thought in language. All of this is included in what Barth calls 'faith.' Along the way we have made recourse to some of Plantinga's helpful distinctions and pointed out a few areas of explicit agreement. We are ready now to give an assessment of the differences between Plantinga and Barth on the nature of faith and the knowledge of God.

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<sup>90</sup> Barth clarifies that, "historical does not mean historically demonstrable or historically demonstrated" (CD I/1, 325; KD I/1, 343). Plantinga, as we have discussed, does not regard historical evidence sufficient to warrant Christian belief. See *WCB*, 268–280, 378–380.

<sup>91</sup> Barth writes: "What a neutral observer could apprehend or may have apprehended of these events was the form of revelation which he did not and could not understand as such. . . . The neutral observer who understood the events recorded in it as revelation would cease thereby to be a neutral observer" (CD I/1, 325; KD I/1, 343). Plantinga discusses the limits of empirical perception: "it is certainly possible to perceive Jesus the Christ and perceive that he is saying that he is the Christ; still, can we perceive that Jesus actually is the Christ? That he actually is the second person of the trinity? I'm inclined to doubt it" (*WCB*, 288).

<sup>92</sup> Murray Rae, reflecting on Kierkegaard's *Fragments*, puts it this way: "Whoever sees the God-Man with the eyes of faith sees not only differently, but also more truthfully than the contemporary eyewitness" (*Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation*, 129).

## ***Plantinga and Barth on Faith and Knowing***

For both Barth and Plantinga it is clear that knowledge of God has propositional content and the means of its expression may be in propositional form. They each affirm the critical and indispensable role of the Spirit in coming to Christian faith. Moreover, they each affirm the importance of the transformative character of the Spirit's work in overcoming the noetic effects of sin. The differences between them, it seems to me, lie in two areas that we will address in the following order: first, the manner and extent to which revelation is to be considered personal; and second, the scope that may be allowed for a knowledge of God that lies outside of faith.

In Barth's theology of revelation and Plantinga's epistemology of Christian belief it is safe to say that knowledge conceived narrowly as *de dicto* assent to propositions falls short of the kind of knowing that is enabled by the self-revelation of God in the gift of faith. And yet, on Plantinga's model, the kind of knowledge that is delivered by the work of the Spirit in the cognitive process of faith is primarily propositional. For Plantinga this follows from the fact that he is interested in an analysis of the possibility of warrant for Christian *belief*, and "what one *believes* are propositions."<sup>93</sup> For Barth, however, propositional knowing—belief *that*—is built on something more foundational—a personal, transforming encounter with the self-revealing God. "Revelation in fact does not differ from the *person* of Jesus Christ nor from the reconciliation accomplished in Him."<sup>94</sup> This is what I have meant to signal in calling Barth a 'theo-foundationalist,' the foundation for theology and the knowledge of God is not a basic proposition, but "the real encounter between God and man, which is faith."<sup>95</sup> Barth refers to this as the "personal quality"<sup>96</sup> of divine address. Propositional content does not therefore stand independent of the person, for God is "present in person in and with what is said by Him."<sup>97</sup> So it is the personal knowing of God in faith that provides the arena in which propositional knowledge is possible. Language and concepts are means through which God makes himself known and thoughts or beliefs about God are generated by God's personal self-

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<sup>93</sup> WCB, 248, emphasis mine.

<sup>94</sup> CD I/1, 119, emphasis added (KD I/1, 122, "Offenbarung ist ja auch nicht verschieden von der Person Jesu Christi und wiederum nicht verschieden von der in ihm geschehenen Versöhnung").

<sup>95</sup> CD I/1, 18 (KD I/1, 17, "des realen Gegenüber von Gott und Mensch — und daß ist eben der Glaube").

<sup>96</sup> CD I/1, 136 (KD I/1, 141, "Persönlichkeit").

<sup>97</sup> CD I/1, 137 (KD I/1, 141, "in Person in und mit dem von ihm Gesagten gegenwärtig ist").

revealing. The ground for all of this is personal relationship with God. “For the point of God’s speech is not to occasion specific thoughts or a specific attitude but through the clarity which God gives us, and which induces both these in us, to bind us to Himself.”<sup>98</sup> While the final end is relationship not propositional assent, propositional assent remains a natural outcome and important aspect of personal relationship.

It might appear that this underlying personal nature of the knowledge of God is not a perspective shared by Plantinga.<sup>99</sup> And yet Plantinga clearly agrees with Barth that the final goal is a close fellowship with God, “some kind of *union* with God, a being united to, at one with him.”<sup>100</sup> The difference with Plantinga is at least partially semantic. Plantinga acknowledges the personal character of Christian belief, but distinguishes, for the sake of his project, propositional knowledge (belief *that*) from belief *in* God.<sup>101</sup> With appeals to Calvin, Aquinas, and of course, Jonathan Edwards, Plantinga distinguishes between the noetic and affective impact of the work of the Spirit. Following this tradition, Plantinga does not use noetic terms to refer to the overarching transformational encounter with the Spirit; but, the priority of this encounter for propositional knowing is unambiguous.<sup>102</sup> In Plantinga’s model the stipulation of the design plan gives the crucial

<sup>98</sup> *CD* I/1, 175 (*KD* I/1, 181–2, “weil das ja der Sinn der Rede Gottes ist, nicht uns zu bestimmten Gedanken oder zu einer bestimmten Haltung zu verlassen, sondern durch die Klarheit, die er uns gibt, und die uns allerdings zu beidem veranlassen wird, uns an ihn selbst zu binden”).

<sup>99</sup> There is no indication in Plantinga’s writings of interaction with the likes of Michael Polanyi or Marjorie Grene.

<sup>100</sup> *WCB*, 317.

<sup>101</sup> See *RBG*, 18, and, *WCB*, 291–294. My thanks to Olive Crisp for raising a potential red herring in the discussion with Barth on this point. Plantinga points out that one may have a *de re* belief in God on the occasion of some experience of God, without affirming even basic theism. This is, however, different from what I have referred to as having *de re knowledge* of God. In the scenario Plantinga gives (294), *de re belief* in God occurs when one *in fact* refers to the object of an experience who is *in reality* God, without knowing *in fact* that the one to whom one refers is *in reality* God. *De re knowledge* of God, on the other hand, involves a knowing who *in reality* is the referent.

<sup>102</sup> The difference between Barth and Plantinga can be illustrated in the way in which they handle the demonic knowledge of God referred to in James 2:19. For Barth, the demonic abstraction noted in James 2:19 is in no sense a genuine knowledge of God (*CD* IV/1, 765; *KD* IV/1, 855–856). For Plantinga, what distinguishes demonic knowledge of God from Christian faith does not seem to be something that is principally noetic in character, but simply their failure to believe *in* God. “The demons, no doubt, are theists and also believe of God that he exists; the demons do not believe in God, because they do not trust and love God and do not make his purposes their own” (*WCB*, 294).

initiating role to an encounter with the Spirit who is personal God. There may be, however, more than a mere semantic difference between Barth and Plantinga on the *nature* of the relationship between propositional knowledge and personal encounter with the God. The priority of personal encounter is entailed in Plantinga's model, and propositional knowledge is dependent on it; but, the nature of that dependency is mostly undefined.<sup>103</sup> Plantinga's presentation of the model might easily create the impression that the IHS serves as a mechanistic trigger occasioning belief, rather than a personal encounter of which propositional belief is one facet of a connected, organic, and relational whole. The IHS may be the trigger for its noetic and affective effects, but it is not clear that those effects remain connected to and derivative on personal fellowship with the Spirit, as they are for Barth. It is possible again on this point that we are merely coming up against the boundaries of the scope for Plantinga's project, focused as it is on warrant for propositional beliefs. Plantinga's description in many of these areas is intentionally minimalist. His intent is not to write a theology of revelation, but instead to provide philosophical cover for the notion of Christian belief as a product of revelation enabled by the design and action of God.

The more pointed difference between Barth and Plantinga appears to be in the scope that Plantinga seems to allow for a knowledge of God that lies outside of faith, to which we now turn. This issue comes to a head in a question raised at the end of the last chapter regarding Plantinga's notion of the *sensus divinitatis*. It seems relatively certain that what the *sensus divinitatis* delivers would not qualify as knowledge of God for Barth. A generic theism could only be a knowledge of God if it were a knowledge given by God in his self-revealing. If the referent of the theistic affirmation is not the Father-Son-Spirit God who is who He is in his act of revelation, then the theistic affirmation falls short.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Andrew Dole criticizes Plantinga for "giving faith not only the last, but the strategically crucial—but somewhat imprecise—word in what is otherwise a rigorous philosophical argument" ("Cognitive Faculties, Cognitive Processes, and the Holy Spirit in Plantinga's Warrant Series," review of *Warrant and Proper Function* and *Warranted Christian Belief*, *Faith and Philosophy* 19 [2002]: 41). Dole believes the lack of definition leaves Plantinga open to the critique that the cognitive *process* of faith is not sufficiently similar to our other cognitive *faculties*. But why think that the work of the Spirit need have any other similarity with our other cognitive faculties than those set out in Plantinga's general requirements for warrant?

<sup>104</sup> It is not that *de re* knowledge of God requires an affirmation of the trinity, nor is it the case that an argument for 'theism' might not be used by God in his personal self-revealing. The point is that *de re*

This God can only be known in his act of revelation, which would have to be added to the *sensus divinitatis* to enable a genuine knowledge of God and therefore a knowledge of *his* existence. For this reason we have suggested that for Barth if there is a *sensus divinitatis* it must operate within the realm of the action of the Holy Spirit. It is not enough to uphold a generic epistemological *sola gratia*. Plantinga would certainly affirm that the *sensus divinitatis* is a gift of *grace*, it is a gift of creation that involves God's gracious design and sustaining. For Barth, however, there is an additional stipulation: the grace of the knowledge of God can only be God's revelation in the action of self-revelation by the Spirit in Jesus Christ. "Only in the One who acts on us as the Reconciler through the cross and resurrection could we perceive the Creator."<sup>105</sup>

Does this mean that Plantinga and Barth simply disagree about the *sensus divinitatis*? Not definitely. Barth would only reject Plantinga (and Calvin's) *sensus divinitatis* if it were a truly *independent* source of a genuine knowledge of God.<sup>106</sup> And, by 'independent,' I mean independent of God's trinitarian self-revealing action.<sup>107</sup> It is possible to read Plantinga as indicating this kind of independence. Clearly the *sensus divinitatis* was originally designed to function without what Plantinga refers to as the IIHS. If the divine self-revealing of the IIHS is entirely unrelated to the *sensus divinitatis*, then the *sensus divinitatis* would indeed have the kind of independence Barth denounced. But, the fact is, Plantinga never claims this kind of independence and it is highly doubtful that either he or Calvin<sup>108</sup> have this kind of independence in mind, even for the

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knowledge of the true 'God' for Barth is only possible by the trinitarian action of God (as earlier described) in the gift of faith.

<sup>105</sup> CD I/1, 412–13 (KD I/1, 433–434, "Nur in dem als Versöhner durch Kreuz und Auferstehung an uns Handelnden konnten wir den Schöpfer . . . erkennen").

<sup>106</sup> Barth indicates that there may be many special hidden anthropological faculties, but that they could not qualify in and of themselves as "points of entry for the determination of man by God's Word" (CD I/1, 203–204; KD I/1, 212–213).

<sup>107</sup> In Barth's view, the qualifier 'trinitarian' does not mark off merely one variety of self-revealing action available to God. Trinity and revelation are inseparable, and nearly redundant. "One may sum up the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity briefly and simply by saying that *God* is the One who reveals Himself" (CD I/1, 380; KD I/1, 400). "God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself *through Himself*. He reveals *Himself*. . . . The Revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect" (CD I/1, 296; KD I/1, 312).

<sup>108</sup> Recall the fore-mentioned argument of Edward Adams that, for Calvin, natural knowledge of God is *revealed* knowledge ("Calvin's View of Natural Knowledge of God," 280–292).



knowledge of God prior to the fall. Although Plantinga is not explicit about it, it is wholly consistent with his A/C model to suggest that the *sensus divinitatis* is dependent on the accompanying action of God giving himself to be known—that is, the action of the trinitarian God of Christian faith. What is required for Barth is not that God is known to be triune, but that the triune God (i.e. the true God) is the one known *de re*, which is only a possibility for creatures by God’s active self-revelation. The *sensus divinitatis* could still function exactly as Plantinga describes, with its triggering conditions and its divine design to deliver doxastic experience resulting in an affirmation of the existence of God. But, the *sensus divinitatis* could never by itself provide an awareness of God *de re*, even by the grace of its being a divinely increased endowment, unless God has also given himself to be known. That is to say that we could take the *sensus divinitatis* merely to describe one aspect of the human reception of divine self-revealing, affirming as it does strict dependence on the grace of creation and redemption. Seen in this way, the *sensus divinitatis* describes one dimension of one way in which we receive a knowledge of God *from above*; rather than an independent human capacity to grasp a knowledge of God *from below*. There is nothing in Plantinga’s description of the natural faculty of the *sensus divinitatis* which would require a commitment to its functioning independently of the supernatural activity of God’s giving himself to be known. Plantinga does affirm the possibility of *de dicto* only assertions of theistic propositions, but whether this counts as knowledge is merely a semantic difference. *De dicto* only assertions simply fail to qualify as knowledge on Barth’s view where the only genuine knowledge of God is the knowledge of Jesus Christ by the gift of faith. Plantinga seems to agree, at least in part, when he stipulates that “only God bestows saving faith.”<sup>109</sup> And yet, he leaves open the door to a generically theistic *de re* knowledge of God independent of the work of the Spirit.<sup>110</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have taken a closer look at Barth’s understanding of what constitutes a genuine knowledge of God by faith. This is cognitive revelation with propositional content, which is expressible in propositional form by the enabling of the

<sup>109</sup> “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 40.

<sup>110</sup> See *WCB*, 293–294.

personal, transformative work of the Spirit. In an effort to clarify Barth's views, we drew on Plantinga's helpful distinctions with respect to propositional expression and the character of assertion and belief. Genuine human knowledge of God for Barth means being given an apprehension of the real reference of statements about God—that is, the one true God made known in Jesus Christ. This knowledge, however, is not humanly accessible outside of the gift of faith. For Barth, the cognitive and transformative aspects of faith are indivisible acts of the personal self-revelation of God. Plantinga agrees that fully fledged Christian belief is a result of the personal, transformative work of the Spirit in the gift of faith. Plantinga's notion of revelation, however, is much less developed—and quite understandably, given his objectives. As a consequence, Plantinga appears to leave open the possibility for an authentic knowledge of God independent of the work of the Spirit. While warranted abstract theistic belief falls far short of Christian faith, it may, in Plantinga's view, count as quite limited, though nevertheless authentic, knowledge of God. To the extent that this is the case, it would seem to be the one point in all of Plantinga's epistemology which crosses Barth's uncompromising line.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, we have examined two strikingly different Christian approaches to the question of the nature and possibility of a human knowledge of God. Our goal has been to test the compatibility and complementarity of the thought of two of the brightest minds dominating Christian theology and Christian analytic philosophy.

We began in Part 1 with two chapters aimed at elucidating the central features of Karl Barth's theology of revelation and clarifying his attitude toward the place of philosophy in theology. In the first chapter, we established that, for Barth, human knowledge of God is the gift of God's self-revealing. It is an objective, personal and cognitive, genuine human knowing, enjoyed when, as one is confronted by the human forms of God's speech, one is given a transforming participation, by the Spirit, in Christ's human knowing of the Father. We dispelled the criticism here, and again in the final chapter, that Barth's opposition to the idea of a knowledge of God as an independently possessed human deposit commits him to a non-cognitive conception of revelation.

In chapter 2, we addressed the common misconception that Barth refuses any role to philosophy in the service of theology. We saw that Barth understands that philosophy *per se* is in fact indispensable for the theologian. What Barth especially opposes are those Enlightenment assumptions that make the human knower the ground of human knowing and thereby reduce theology to anthropology.

In Part 2, our focus was on Alvin Plantinga's Christian epistemology of warranted belief, and its contrasting relationship to Barth's theology of revelation. We acknowledged the formal dissimilarity of these approaches and trained our sights on areas of apparent material agreement, disagreement or tension. In chapter 3, we found a general alignment emerging as Plantinga shares Barth's rejection of specific Enlightenment assumptions, and Plantinga's epistemological externalism leaves open the possibility for Barth's notion of revelation as divine self-revealing. This general agreement, however, reached a limit with Plantinga's openness to natural theology—a tension with Barth, flagged for closer analysis in chapter 5.

In chapter 4, we explored Plantinga's theologically driven models for warranted theistic and Christian belief. The general alignment between Barth and Plantinga grew into an argument for essential compatibility on all but two substantial points. Both thinkers adopt an inductive approach, accepting, without attempting demonstration, the givenness of Christian revelation. Plantinga agrees with Barth that a demonstration of the truth of what is known is neither required for knowledge, nor something that philosophers are competent to offer. Furthermore, on Plantinga's model, a priority in origination and formation resides with the free action of God, without at any point undermining or overriding its thoroughgoing humanness. We also found a complementarity in bringing together Barth's robust theologizing and Plantinga's trenchant philosophizing. While Barth offers greater theological depth, Plantinga offers additional philosophical argument to support, for instance, Barth's rejection of various potential philosophical encroachments on theological knowing, and Barth's openness to warranted belief as the gift of God. Two issues, however, surfaced as significant potential exceptions to the general pattern of compatibility. The first of these was again the question of natural theology, specifically the potential for deploying philosophical arguments in support of belief. The second issue had to do with what constitutes genuine human knowledge of God, and was raised by Plantinga's apparent openness to a natural human faculty for arriving at theistic belief.

Part 3 devoted two chapters to an analysis and appraisal of those significant areas of potential disagreement just mentioned. In chapter 5, we examined Barth's thorough-going rejection of natural theology and Plantinga's acknowledgement of a role for negative and positive apologetics. We moved past their agreed rejection of the necessity and sufficiency of human arguments for warranted Christian belief, and explored the apparent discontinuity in their thought about a contributing role for human arguments. On the

question of negative apologetics, we extended our thesis of complementarity. I argued that Plantinga demonstrates the possibility of remaining consistent with Barth's theology of revelation and the all-sufficiency of the deliverances of faith while maintaining a vital role for a Christian approach to negative apologetics. On the question of positive apologetics, I argued that we are not obliged to accept a divergence between Barth and Plantinga if one interprets Plantinga to be endorsing the arguments of natural theology as catalysts to or extensions of the deliverances of faith, rather than independent sources of warrant. We reserved for the final chapter a question raised about the relationship between the deliverances of faith and those of Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis*.

In chapter 6, we concluded our study by looking at the role of faith and what constitutes a genuine human knowledge of God. Here we found that, for both Barth and Plantinga, knowledge of God has propositional content and the means of its expression may be propositional in form. Moreover, they both affirm the critical and indispensable, transformative role of the Spirit in overcoming the noetic effects of sin and coming to Christian faith. Plantinga offers the key distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* belief. Given Barth's theology of revelation, clearly there could be no genuine human knowledge of God that does not yield *de re* belief. Plantinga, on the other hand, seems to part ways with Barth in his openness to the possibility of a generically theistic *de re* knowledge of God independent of the work of the Spirit in the gift of faith.

In summary, with a few tensions noted, we have found an extraordinary depth of compatibility between Karl Barth's theology of revelation and Alvin Plantinga's epistemology of Christian belief. The specters of confrontation and discord have, with closer inspection, largely dissolved into a recognition of essential agreement. The Christian notion of revelation that Plantinga defends philosophically aligns with Barth's rigorously nuanced theological view. Furthermore, the philosophical approach informing Plantinga's defense falls within Barth's understanding of the proper deployment of philosophy for theology. It is hoped that, along the way, the dialogue between Christian theology and Christian analytic philosophy has provided an opportunity to clarify the thought of two extremely influential figures in those disciplines, and to that extent might serve to encourage further mutually illuminating exchange.

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