THEOLOGY AND REALITY:

CRITICAL REALISM IN THE THOUGHT

OF ALISTER E. MCGRATH

_____

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

_____

by

Brian Lee Goard

December 2011

APPROVAL SHEET

THEOLOGY AND REALITY:

CRITICAL REALISM IN THE THOUGHT

OF ALISTER E. MCGRATH

Brian Lee Goard

Read and Approved by:

_____
Gregg R. Allison (Chair)

_____
Chad O. Brand

_____
Theodore J. Cabal

Date_____

For Kimberly

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

This dissertation grew out of two doctoral seminars and my dissertation supervisor's strong advice to narrow my original topic. My first semester in the doctoral program, I took a seminar led by Dr. Chad Brand on God, revelation, and authority. In that seminar, Dr. Brand helped to fuel my interest in questions concerning theological methodology. A seminar on philosophy of religion led by Dr. Ted Cabal eventuated in a paper on realism and antirealism. It was in researching that paper that I first encountered Alister McGrath's work on the topics of scientific and critical realism. I became very interested in the whole of McGrath's work, yet what I anticipated as a dissertation on his entire corpus soon narrowed to deal only with McGrath's scientific theology, and then was finally trimmed, at the urging of Dr. Gregg Allison, to deal with just one facet of McGrath's scientific theological method, namely, critical realism.

When I started in the Ph.D. program in the Fall 2004 semester, I never anticipated speeding so quickly through the coursework and comprehensive exams only to slow almost to a halt during the dissertation writing. Full-time work as a pastor and college instructor alongside an exciting, yet demanding, adoption process meant that the dissertation sat on the shelf all too many times. I am so glad God sent these blessings into our lives, however. A new fifteen-month-old son, Nicholas, came home to my wife and me on January 21, 2010, and with the stress of the adoption process behind us, we soon settled into a rhythm that allowed me to complete this project. That rhythm was

made possible by God's gracious ordering of our circumstances.

Specifically, at several key junctures of this project, my wife (who is also in a graduate program) and I have been blessed to be near family. Their love and support has made a world of difference to both of our educational pursuits. My parents, Whudy and Carol, have been a constant encouragement through more than twelve years of college, and never once have they suggested that I go no further. I must also mention the contribution of my mother-in-law, Drema, who spent numerous days caring for our son while my wife and I were covered with teaching and writing responsibilities. More specifically, Drema's selfless assistance opened up key windows of time for me to finish writing and editing this project.

My wife, Kimberly, has been my most significant support. We married while I was in seminary, and when I mentioned going on for doctoral studies, she didn't hesitate. She has been a faithful dialogue partner at every stage of my writing, and when I slowed in fatigue or worry, she always spoke fitting and energizing words.

I am also happy to mention the tireless willingness of my adviser, Dr. Gregg Allison, to carry me along in this project. He has read these chapters numerous times and has been willing to take it up and put it down as I have taken semesters off for work and extensive travels for the adoption process. His guidance and suggestions have made this a much better dissertation; any remaining weaknesses, however, rest on my shoulders.

My prayer is that this dissertation will in some way be of use to those interested in theological method and in Alister McGrath's work in general. McGrath's work provides some good answers to the enduring question of the relationship between science and theology. As the dialogue between these two fields develops, I hope this

study serves to point to the Creator of all reality, God over all.

Brian Lee Goard

Louisville, Kentucky

September 2011

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Alister McGrath has written and edited well over forty books, not to mention
numerous journal articles, and he continues to be quite prolific. In 2003, the year
McGrath turned fifty years old, Sung Wook Chung said of McGrath, "His teaching and
administrating ministry has made an indelible impact upon a new generation of
evangelical church leaders both in the Anglican Church and in the church worldwide."[1]
Since those words were written, McGrath's influence and readership has continued to
grow, largely due to his expanding treatment of issues surrounding the relationship
between science and theology. Emerging from his studies of this relationship is what
McGrath terms a scientific theology or the science of God, a body of work that is
essentially a study in theological method.

McGrath's career has largely been taken up with historical theology. He has
published works on a number of topics in this area, including (but not limited to) books
on the history of the Christian doctrine of justification, the life of John Calvin, Luther's
theology of the cross, an intellectual biography of T. F. Torrance, and a substantive

---

[1]Sung Wook Chung, "Preface," in *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Engagement: A Dynamic Engagement*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), vii.

1

textbook on historical theology.[2]

McGrath also has a great interest in science and more specifically in the dialogue between science and religion. He was awarded an Oxford D.Phil. for research in the natural sciences in December of 1977 and in 1978 gained first class honors in theology. His work of late has been dominated by questions that arise at the interface of these two disciplines. He has written a historical work on the foundations of the dialogue between science and religion and is currently in the process of developing a scientific theology. The first of his three-volume set, *A Scientific Theology*, appeared in 2001 and the second and third volumes were released in 2002 and 2003.[3] So far this project is largely a work in theological methodology.[4] Specifically, McGrath is interested in the relationship between theological and scientific methodologies. This sizeable issue involves McGrath in a whirlwind of debate that arises from philosophical, scientific, and theological quarters.

The three volumes of *A Scientific Theology* "set out an approach to theology

---

[2]Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); idem, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); idem, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); idem, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999); idem, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

[3]Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001-2003).

[4]He writes, "The structure of this trilogy should make it clear that this work is primarily concerned with theological method, rather than with specific theological topics." Alister E. McGrath, *Nature*, vol. 1 of *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 3.

which respects the unique nature of that discipline, while at the same time drawing on the insights of the natural sciences in a process of respectful and principled dialogue."[5] In these volumes, McGrath seeks to develop a public theology[6] that does not regard contemporary challenges from the philosophical and scientific communities unworthy of comment.[7] These books offer a broad methodology for the task of theology that is realist in orientation, committed to the preeminent place Scripture has in and over the theological task, and intellectually responsible when it comes to the history, methods, and limitations of human knowledge and the natural sciences.

The goal in this dissertation is not to evaluate the entirety of McGrath's argument in *A Scientific Theology*, but rather to engage one particular facet of his thinking in those volumes, namely the philosophy of critical realism. Critical realism is multifaceted in its historical use, a fact that will be demonstrated in chapter 2, but for present purposes it suffices to define McGrath's use of the term.

---

[5]Alister E. McGrath, *The Science of God: An Introduction to Scientific Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), ix.

[6]Public theology here refers to something like the "world-viewish" theology of Arthur F. Holmes that has an apologetic tone and significance across the academic disciplines. A theology that is public must be done in and for the church but it must not be defined in postliberal or other terms that would limit its voice solely to those within the church and thereby rob it of its trans-traditional voice, its right (and power) to speak truth to those outside the church. Referring to the latter, McGrath writes, "The doctrine of [the] creation of the world and humanity is an aspect of the Christian tradition which offers predictions or retroductions which it believes to be valid *outside* that specific tradition" (McGrath, *Reality*, 76, emphasis mine). Holmes refers to world-viewish theology in Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a Worldview*, Studies in a Christian Worldview, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 40.

[7]The argument that theology should speak not only to the church but also to the world will not play a large role in this dissertation, though that assumption comes to

Defining Critical Realism

Philosophically, McGrath's critical realism can be located between naïve realism and postmodern antirealism. Naïve realism argues that "knowledge is directly determined by an objective reality within the world."[8] That is to say, there is an unmediated movement from reality's presentation of itself to knowledge. Postmodern antirealism goes to the other extreme, denying mind-independent reality. On this view, "The human mind freely constructs its ideas without any reference to an alleged external world."[9] Critical realism differs significantly from these two positions. Departing from antirealism, it affirms the existence of a mind-independent reality and argues that such reality can be apprehended, albeit never perfectly. Concerning the other end of the spectrum, critical realism is not as confident as naïve realism; it argues that the knower is significantly involved in the move from reality to knowledge. McGrath considers N.T. Wright's definition an "excellent account" of the critical realist position. Wright submits that critical realism is,

> a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling patch of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence "critical"). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our inquiry into 'reality,' so that our assertions about 'reality' acknowledge their

the fore throughout McGrath's project.

[8]Alister E. McGrath, *Reality*, vol. 2 of *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 195.

[9]Ibid.

own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower.[10]

McGrath develops and then employs this insight, along with independent developments in the work of critical realist, Roy Bhaskar, as a part of his own theological method.

Thesis

Critical realism is a methodological tool that McGrath uses throughout his project, and the ways in which he has defended and applied critical realism in *A Scientific Theology* will be the focus of this project.[11] Specifically, the thesis of this dissertation is that Alister McGrath has utilized critical realism in a way that strengthens his theological method and that serves a number of good theological ends, yet McGrath's methodology is in need of revision in some areas, and clarification in others, if it is going to be theologically acceptable.

---

[10]N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the People of God, vol. 1 (London: SPCK, 1992), 35, quoted in McGrath, *Reality*, 196. Vern Poythress offers a similar definition: "The 'critical realist,' in distinction from the naive realist, acknowledges that appearances can be deceptive, and that in practice science is always tentative and subject to revision. But science aims at true description and explanation. Though we cannot have perfect certainty about its descriptions in any particular case, we are traveling toward truth, and some of the descriptions are true to facts out there. For example, we describe bulk matter as being made up of atoms held together by chemical bonds, because there *are* atoms, and they *are* held together by chemical bonds." Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossay, 2006), 197.

[11]Other books and articles from McGrath will be brought to bear at various points throughout the dissertation on his use of critical realism.

Method

    Chapters 2 through 4 are offered as support for the thesis of this dissertation. Chapter 2 will show that critical realism is not limited to any one particular field or project. Progressing along historical lines, the chapter will begin with early use of the term "critical realism" and end with its use in twentieth-century social science and theology. By showing the wide range of applications for critical realism, the viability of critical realism for McGrath's project will be strengthened. Furthermore, because a variety of critical realisms exist, a historical study of these various forms will illuminate the specific form of critical realism McGrath brings to the service of his theological project.

    With the demonstration in chapter 2 in place, namely the claim that critical realism can be utilized in a number of settings, it will remain to be seen whether McGrath defends and applies critical realism in a way that is viable for his own project. Chapter 3 will present an overview of McGrath's theological setting and method, and then the particular themes in McGrath's work on which critical realism impinges will be delineated. Chapter 3 will give a clear picture of McGrath's work in *A Scientific Theology*, with special reference to how critical realism guides and serves his theological method.

    After demonstrating in chapters 2 and 3 that critical realism has a wide range of applicability and how it specifically serves McGrath's project, chapter 4 will address the questions of whether McGrath has defended and applied critical realism well, and what needs to be deleted, clarified, or reworked. A number of minor clarifications or corrections will be suggested, and yet several areas will require significant attention. For

example, McGrath's application of critical realism to the theological concept of divine revelation is at certain points in need of significant correction and further argumentation. To cite the primary example in chapter 4, McGrath has applied critical realism in a way that exalts the epistemic status of religious experience, which he takes to be a "layer" of divine revelation, and yet his argument is significantly underdeveloped. Thus chapter 4 offers an extended excursus, describing one argument that could significantly improve McGrath's application of critical realism. Accordingly, chapter 4 will bring the dissertation's thesis to full development while including a final section containing suggestions for further study, areas which are outside the scope of this dissertation, but are nevertheless directly related to McGrath's critical realist theological method.

Finally, chapter 5 will review the thesis of this dissertation and consider the path that has been taken in defense of that thesis. Specifically, this final chapter will demonstrate how each of the previous chapters serves as evidence for the dissertation's thesis.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORY OF CRITICAL REALISM: EVIDENCE
OF ITS DIVERSE APPLICABILITY

Introduction

The term "critical realism" is found in the works of a diverse group of writers,

many of whom seem to be working independently of the others. While these thinkers

rarely acknowledge one another, certain similarities can be found among their works. To

cite two primary examples, they share on the one hand a common affirmation of the

mind-independent nature of reality and, on the other, a recognition of the mediated nature

of the knowledge of that reality. Thus, critical realists, despite the diversity among them,

are fundamentally committed to metaphysical realism and a specific posture concerning

the nature of knowledge.

This chapter will delineate the development of critical realism from its

beginnings and, in the course of doing so, it will demonstrate the presence of these basic

agreements among critical realists. This delineation will serve two primary goals, the

first of which is to provide a context for the analysis and evaluation of Alister McGrath's

utilization of critical realism (chaps. 3 and 4), and the second is to demonstrate the wide

applicability of critical realism. Regarding the latter, it will be seen that critical realism

does not limit one to any one particular field of study, nor to any one view of God.

Therefore, taken as a methodological tool and not a system or model of theology, critical

realism may be utilized in a variety of settings. This observation will serve as a first step

8

towards the dissertation's case that given certain corrections and developments, critical realism is a theologically viable tool for McGrath's project.

American Critical Realism

The term "critical realism" has a long and rich history.[1] The English expression appears to originate from Roy W. Sellars, a twentieth century philosopher who published *Critical Realism: A Study of the Nature and Conditions of Knowledge* in 1916.[2] In that work, Sellars examines the central problems of epistemology and contends for a "full-fledged theory of knowledge."[3] His critical realist epistemology was generally accepted by a small group of philosophers who joined him for the 1920 *Essays in Critical Realism: A Cooperative Study of the Problem of Knowledge*.[4] By 1924 a number of philosophers had responded to these essays, and Sellars answers some of their main

---

[1]Andreas Losch contends that the first references to critical realism were in the German language (as the term "*Kritischer Realismus*"). Andreas Losch, "On the Origins of Critical Realism," *Theology and Science* 7, no.1 (2009): 86. Niekerk also takes this view and avers, "In German philosophy, it designates those positions which take account of Kant's critical epistemology but deny that the subjectivity of our experience makes it impossible to acquire valid knowledge of the external world as it is in itself." Kees van Kooten Niekerk, "A Critical Realist Perspective," in *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the current Dialogue*, ed. Niels H. Gregersen and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1998), 52.

[2]Roy Wood Sellars, *Critical Realism: A Study of the Nature and Conditions of Knowledge* (Chicago and New York: Rand McNally, 1916). For more on Sellars, see William K. Frankina, "Roy Wood Sellars (1880-1973)," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1974): 230-32.

[3]Sellars, *Critical Realism*, 15.

[4]Durant Drake, et al., *Essays in Critical Realism: A Cooperative Study of the Problem of Knowledge* (London: Macmillan, 1920).

9

objections in an article published by *The Philosophical Review*.[5] In that exchange he

offers this definition: "critical realism is essentially a *reconstruction* of

representationalism which does justice both to the reference and the mechanism of the

knowledge claim."[6] The representationalism that he speaks of in this definition is

committed to the idea that the objects of human perception are representations of objects

rather than the objects themselves. This is the view of metaphysical idealism which finds

no way to bridge the gap between the perceived and the perceiver. Given this

unbridgeable gap, idealists do away with the former—the perceived— all together, at

least when it comes to objective, mind-independent reality; in sum, humans only perceive

ideas, never real objects.

Several factors lead Sellars to reject the representationalist view and to

develop and adopt critical realism as an alternative. First, the view tends toward

relativism, for there is no external reality by which one's perceptions may be measured

and evaluated. Critical realism, on the other hand, acknowledges human fallibility and

the likelihood that one's observations will need to be critiqued. While valuing the notion

that ideas are a crucial part of knowledge acquisition, Sellars seeks to show that certain

aspects of realism are also necessary for a complete understanding of the human

experience.

Secondly, in rejecting representationalism, Sellars also appeals to the realist

argument that human beings have obvious success in guiding and controlling their

environment, maintaining that "tested knowledge-claims harmonize and enable us to

---

[5]Roy Wood Sellars, "Critical Realism and Its Critics," *The Philosophical Review* 33 (1925): 379-97.

build up a system of knowledge which appears to give us insight into nature, and which connects up with guidance, control and prediction."[7]   Furthermore, "To say that an idea is true is to say that it gives knowledge, that is, that it grasps the characteristics of the objects referred to."[8] This does not mean that knowledge-claims are infallible or unaffected by things other than the object itself. Our initial judgments, for example, may need to be chastened and modified by whether or not things we claim to know allow us to predict future occurrences. The fact that a judgment is susceptible to being corrected does not, however, entail that knowledge is illusory or impossible.

Finally, Sellars finds additional reason to reject representationalism in the strong human inclination toward common sense; the common understanding of truth assumes realism. He grants that common-sense understandings are not always correct, but finds it questionable to completely put aside such strong intuitions concerning the nature of truth: "To say that an idea is true is to say that it gives knowledge, that is, that it grasps the characteristics of the objects referred to."[9] This claim holds throughout the many later forms of critical realism, namely the claim that the difference between truth and falsity is measured, at least in part, by reality, specifically by objects that do not depend for their existence upon human perceivers. Certain criteria are used to test one's initial observation of objects. Nevertheless, the fact that a judgment is susceptible to being corrected does not entail that people can never or never do know anything. "It is,

---

[6]Ibid., 386. Italics added.

[7]Ibid., 387.

[8]Ibid., 389.

[9]Ibid.

11

perhaps, too bad that we have to put up with 'knowledge,'" writes Sellars, "but seeing

what our situation is in relation to things around us, we should rather congratulate

ourselves that our mind-brain can go this far."[10]

Sellars holds that the "central doctrine" of critical realism is "that knowledge

of external things and of past events is an interpretation of these objects in terms of

understood predicates and does not involve the literal presence of these objects in the

field of consciousness of the knower. It is the mediateness of knowledge that is

stressed."[11] In short, critical realism is a theory of knowledge, "a reinterpretation of the

nature of knowledge."[12] Sellars refers to the common understanding of knowledge (i.e.

the default position of the layman) as "natural realism."[13]

> The outlook of the plain man on the world is realistic. He perceives what he calls
> physical things and reacts to them in appropriate ways. He believes that these
> physical things are experienced in much the same manner by all normal human
> beings and that they are evidently independent, for their properties and existence, of
> man's experience of them. All workers see and handle the tools which are
> necessary for cooperation. Sailors pull on the same rope; the farmer and his helpers
> load the same wagon with sheaves of wheat or barley grown on a field which has
> been tilled by them year after year. . . . But why multiply examples? To none of us
> does this outlook seem strange.[14]

For Sellars, this natural realism was the place from which contemporary musings on

epistemology began; indeed, to start very far from a view that has such an intuitive

weight would be a poor beginning. The common understanding of truth assumes realism,

---

[10]Ibid., 396.

[11]Roy Wood Sellars, "What Is the Correct Interpretation of Critical Realism?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1927): 238.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Later writers have given it the label, "naïve realism."

[14]Sellars, *Critical Realism*, 1-2.

and although common understandings are not always correct, Sellers and many other scholars feel uneasy about completely discarding such strong intuitions concerning the nature of truth. Because philosophy "arises in an experience already organized," to assume some counterintuitive explanation of experience as one's starting point would seem to be poor methodology. Sellars does not ask his readers to blindly accept the common point of view,[15] but he does contend that it is the best place to start. Certainly a counterintuitive position would not be a *better* place to start.

Upon examination and careful analysis and correction of the common position, the details of which are beyond the scope of this chapter, Sellars concludes that "knowledge is not a matter of direct apprehension by the mind of what is non-mental. That is too simple a theory to cover the facts, and even common sense is not entirely sympathetic with it."[16] So natural realism, with its intuitive appeal, is good as far as it goes, but it does not have enough categories to account for the varieties of experience. According to A. G. Ramsperger, examples of this variety include, "the double image, the partially submerged bent stick, the toe that is felt after the leg has been amputated."[17] Without categories to deal with these obvious issues of perception, one ends up with a

---

[15]"But the justification of Natural Realism as a theory of knowledge is another affair, and appeal to the experience of the ordinary man is beside the point. Many facts must be organized in relation to one another and many conflicts settled; much that common sense has left vague and in obscurity must be brought into the light and carefully examined" (ibid., 6).

[16]Ibid., 123.

[17]A.G. Ramsperger, "Critical Realism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 261.

kind of direct realism that is clearly absurd.[18] People do perceive through their

sensations, but this in no way entails idealism. The obvious fact that perception is

mediated, as in the case of the bent stick in the water, does not necessitate that there is no

independent stick and that all that is being perceived is a mental representation. A

present, *real* stick exists independently from the mind. As Ramsperger states, "We look

with sensations but not *at* them."[19]

Persisting in Sellars' view and throughout the many later forms of critical

realism is the idea that the difference between truth and falsity is measured, at least in

part, by reality, specifically by objects that do not depend for their existence upon human

perceivers. Sellars' form of critical realism does not play a prominent role in later uses of

the term. His son, Wilfred Sellars, did offer a robust defense of this early form of critical

realism, but the Sellars is rarely mentioned in contemporary epistemological debates.

Critical realism eventually is brought to life in another field of study, thanks to the work

of Ian Barbour. This chapter will now turn to the emergence of critical realism in the

context of the science-religion dialogue.

Critical Realism in the Science and Religion Dialogue

The conversation between science and theology has a long and interesting

past. By the mid-1960s a unique form of critical realism had been brought to bear on that

dialogue and it has served since then, not as content for the dialogue, but as its

---

[18]Ramsperger asks, "Are we to say that the real world actually contains all that is disclosed in all these circumstances" (ibid.).

[19]Ibid., 263.

"grammar."[20] Nowhere is the presence of this grammar more evident than in the works of the three scientist-theologians, Ian Barbour, John Polkinghorne, and Arthur Peacocke. These three have very different views of God but all seem to share the same critical realist methodology.[21] This section will begin with a discussion of these three scholars and then will conclude with observations concerning Thomas Torrance, who is another principle voice of critical realism.

Ian Barbour

In all likelihood, Ian Barbour will be accredited as the one who introduced critical realism into the dialogue between science and religion.[22] Barbour is a trained physicist and has also had an extended interest in theology. After earning his Ph.D. in physics from the University of Chicago (1949), he attained the Bachelor's of Divinity from Yale Divinity School (1956).

Barbour's work is evidence of the diverse applicability of critical realism. Whereas some have used critical realism in postliberal and evangelical settings,

---

[20]Reflecting on the collaboration between theology and other disciplines, Allen writes, "Critical realism can be the grammar of that collaboration, so long as we get it right" (ibid.). Paul L. Allen, *Ernan McMullin and Critical Realism in the Science-Religion Dialogue* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 10.

[21]The vary only slightly in their core definitions of critical realism.

[22]Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Critical Realism and Other Realisms," in *Fifty Years in Science and Religion: Ian G. Barbour and His Legacy*, Ashgate Science and Religion Series, ed. Robert John Russell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 85. McGrath finds in a short passage from Barbour's *Issues in Science and Religion* "the key stimulus" behind the adoption of critical realist principles by those relating the fields of science and religion. Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology,* vol 2., *Reality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 205.

Barbour's work culminates in a form of process theology.[23] In one of his many

statements of affinity for the process model, he writes, "In the last analysis, the most

central Christian model for God is not a king or a clockmaker but the person of Christ

himself. In that person it is love, even more than justice or power, which is manifest.

Process theology reiterates on a cosmic scale the motif of the cross, the power of a love

which accepts suffering."[24] In other places he wonders, along with process theists,

whether the doctrine of omnipotence is compatible with the human experience of evil and

free will.[25] Furthermore, he offers the idea that "a God of persuasion is particularly

appropriate to the experience of reconciliation and the historical person of Christ."[26]

This tendency towards process thought is not without its qualifications, but Barbour's

thought lies near the mainstream of process theology. Critical realism plays a prominent

role in the method by which he arrived there.[27]

---

[23]For comment on Barbour's work from within the process community, see David Ray Griffin, "On Ian Barbour's *Issues in Science and Religion*," *Zygon* 23 (1988): 57-81.

[24]Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 167. For a full statement on process theology from Barbour, see Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, The Gifford Lectures, vol. 1 (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 218-70.

[25]Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 165-66.

[26]Ibid., 167.

[27]Cooper argues that Barbour's departures from process thought are not significant enough to distance him from process theology's "thoroughly panentheistic character." John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 304.   McGrath too thinks it is fair to categorize Barbour as a panentheist. Alister E. McGrath, *Science and Religion: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 209. Barbour does come closer to open theism (than he does to process theism) when he attributes God's limitation in creation to a decision on God's part, but this attribution, according to Cooper, "does not negate the

This critical realism saw its beginnings in Barbour's *Issues in Science and Religion* (1966).[28] Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, Barbour seems to be unaware of, or at least not interested in, the work of Sellars and his followers.[29] Barbour and Sellars do, however, share certain traits, as will become apparent in the following discussion.

Barbour develops his critical realism, in part, as he interacts with the various theories about the nature of truth. Historically, the criterion of truth has been defined in one of three ways. On the correspondence view, truth claims (propositions) are measured by their correspondence to reality. The coherence view measures truth claims according to their ability to fit within an already existing body of beliefs. The pragmatist view

correlative relationship of God and creation or the existence of creation in the consequent nature of God, as explained by process theology" (Cooper, *Panentheism*, 304).

[28]Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

[29]Gregersen, "Critical Realism and Other Realisms," 86. This observation extends to the subsequent work of others in the science-religion field. See Donald L. Denton Jr., *Historiography and Hermeneutics In Jesus Studies: An Examination of The Work Of John Dominic Crossan And Ben F. Meyer* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 212. Denton offers a possible explanation for this lack of interaction, on the part of Barbour and others, with the American critical realism of Sellars: "This may be largely attributed to the context within which both groups work, which determines where their theoretical interests lie. The later critical realists work principally in the philosophy of science, and are particularly concerned with the intelligibility and validity of theological statements in light of the nature of science; science and theology are thought to be two complementary rather than contradictory ways of speaking about reality. These critical realists see their work as a development beyond the logical positivism that dominated the philosophy of science for much of the twentieth century. . . .The early critical realists, on the other hand, were philosophers focusing on the general philosophical problems of epistemology and theories of perception, dealing in classic post-Kantian categories." Denton, *Historiography and Hermeneutics*, 212.

17

measures truth by its workability—whether the belief is pragmatic or beneficial.[30] While

Barbour's realism is buttressed by the correspondence theory of truth that so often

accompanies realist theories, he is not willing to limit the criterion to any one of these

options. He does conclude that "the *meaning* of truth is correspondence with reality,"[31]

yet he claims that the *criteria* of truth are plural and cannot be limited to correspondence

alone. That is to say, the correspondence view is not sufficient as a sole criterion of truth;

the proper criteria include correspondence with reality (i.e., "agreement with the data," in

Barbour's terms) as well as coherence (whether the beliefs integrate harmoniously),

scope (whether it can address non-religious human experience meaningfully), and

fertility (its potency to effect people).[32] "The criteria taken together include the valid

insights in all these views of truth. One or another of the criteria may be more important

than the others at a particular stage of scientific inquiry. Because correspondence is

taken as the definition of truth, this is a form of realism, but it is a *critical realism*

because a combination of criteria is used."[33]

      Critical realists do their best to honor reality but they also understand that

human attempts to represent objective reality are, to greater and lesser degrees, theory

laden. For Barbour, formulating theory (doctrine) that corresponds with the realities of

---

[30]Early pragmatist William James (1842-1910) contended that "truth *happens* to an idea. It becomes true, is *made* true by events." William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 201. For an introduction to the various views of truth, see Michael P. Lynch, ed. *The Nature of Truth: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001).

[31]Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 110. Emphasis his.

[32]See below for a fuller description of these.

religious ritual and religious experience is the task of the theologian, but the task cannot

be solely a matter of correspondence. Religious ritual and experience are themselves

theory laden; thus, one must also "examine the influence of beliefs on experience and on

the interpretation of story and ritual."[34] How one determines the level of correspondence

is thus affected by these and other factors. While the criterion of coherence helps guard

against individualism, the criterion of scope is also needed to measure the ability of

religious beliefs to map other areas of human existence, areas beyond the religious.

Concerning scope, Barbour writes, "In a scientific age they [religious beliefs] must also

at least be consistent with the findings of science."[35] Furthermore, religious theories

must also be measured by the multi-dimensional criterion of fertility: "At the personal

level, religious beliefs can be judged by their power to effect personal transformation and

the integration of personality. What are their effects on human character? Do they have

the capacity to inspire and sustain compassion and create love? Are they relevant to

urgent issues of our age, for example, environmental destruction and nuclear war?"[36]

The "critical" in Barbour's "critical realism" is evident not only in his use of

these additional criteria for religious belief and theory, but also in the way he describes

scientific method. In science there is "no direct route" from data to theory.[37] Theoretical

models must, according to Barbour, avoid the excesses of naïve realism at the one

---

[33]Barbour, *Religion and Science*,110.

[34]Ibid., 113.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid., 115.

19

extreme and instrumentalism at the other. Contrary to classical realism, scientific models and theories "cannot be taken as literal descriptions of entities in the world."[38] Nevertheless, instrumentalists are incorrect for maintaining "that models and theories are calculating devices whose only function is to allow the correlation and prediction of observations," and that "models and theories do not describe or refer to real entities in the world."[39]

In opposition to the extremes of classical realism and instrumentalism, Barbour affirms the "intermediate"[40] position, namely, critical realism. He thinks it is a model that "preserves the scientist's realistic intent while recognizing that models and theories are imaginative human constructs. Models, on this reading, are to be taken seriously but not literally; they are neither literal pictures nor useful fictions, but limited and inadequate ways of imagining what is not observable. They make tentative ontological claims that there are entities in the world something like those postulated in the models."[41] Thus, religious models are like scientific models in that they are analogical. Religious models are ultimately rooted in reality—they are not merely "useful fictions"—but are "human constructs that help us interpret experience by imagining what cannot be observed."[42]

---

[38]Ibid., 117.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Barbour offers a defense of critical realism in Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, 162-74. As seen below, Nancey Murphy criticizes him here for landing between two views that are not necessarily opposing alternatives.

[41]Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 117.

[42]Ibid.,119. To say that models are merely useful fictions would be the view of some religious instrumentalists who take the sole function of religious models to be an

Barbour's critical realism is not without its critics. Nancey Murphy claims

that he sometimes seeks "a midpoint between positions that are not in any sense on a

spectrum."[43] She contends that Barbour arrived at his critical realist position largely on

the basis of this mistaken assumption. He has mistakenly taken "claims for the

objectivity of science" and "claims that science can be explained sociologically" as

positions that oppose one another.[44] Murphy wonders why a position cannot be socially

conditioned and at the same time be true. She writes, "There is no necessary opposition

between sociological accounts of knowledge and more traditional epistemological

accounts. They are analyses on different levels, and there is no place half way between

them, which critical realism intends to fill. It is important to see the different questions

each is intended to answer rather than to see each as half if the answer to a single

question."[45] Murphy's success in attempting to undermine the application of critical

realism to the science-theology dialogue, and specifically her criticisms of McGrath's

work, will be evaluated in chapter 4.

John Polkinghorne

John Polkinghorne's scholarship provides another example of how critical

realism can be applied in a variety of settings. Polkinghorne worked as a theoretical

---

expression and evocation of "distinctive ethical attitudes" (ibid.). One example, to which
Barbour points, would be Richard Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of
Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).

[43]Nancey Murphy, "Ian Barbour on Religion and the Methods of Science,"
Zygon (March 1996): 16.

[44]Ibid., 16-17.

[45]Ibid., 18.

physicist for twenty-five years before becoming an Anglican priest.[46] Since that time he

has spent over twenty years "seeking to combine the perspectives of science and

Christianity into a stereoscopic worldview."[47]

Polkinghorne's critical realism accompanies him to theological convictions in

stark contrast to those of Barbour. A comparison of his work to Barbour's further

supports the case for the diverse applicability of critical realism. While both men use

critical realism and share a similar view of Scripture,[48] Barbour arrives at process theism

and Polkinghorne affirms the *Apostles' Creed*.

---

[46]John Polkinghorne, "From Physicist to Priest," in *Science and Theology: The New Consonance*, ed. Ted Peters (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998).

[47]John Polkinghorne, *Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), ix. His view of the realist character of both science and religion is evident as he writes, "I have always wanted to make it clear that I did not leave physics because of any disillusionment with that subject. I retain a lively interest in science and a deep respect for all that it can tell us. Yet its enthralling account is not sufficient by itself to quench our thirst for understanding, for science describes only one dimensions of the many-layered reality within which we live, restricting itself to the impersonal and general, and bracketing out the personal and unique. Many things altered in my life when I changed from being a physicist and became a priest, but one significant thing remained the same: the central importance of the search for truth. All my life I have been trying to explore reality. That exploration includes science, but it also necessarily takes me beyond it" (ibid.).

[48]For example, Polkinghorne views Scripture as a record of the spiritual experiences of others, a record which may evoke a similar encounter in the reader. John Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship between Science and Theology* (London: SPCK, 1991), 64. He calls the Bible a "vehicle of a personal encounter, demanding a response." He writes, "The true Word of God is written, not with paper and ink, but in the flesh and blood of that life lived in Palestine long ago (John 1.14) and in the continuing life of the Risen Lord" (ibid., 62). He seems to have no awareness that the "true Word of God" can refer to the living Word and the written Word (they do not rule one another out), and nowhere does he consider the claims of biblical authors who view their writings as the very word of God.

In his Gifford Lectures, published in 1994 as *Science and Christian Belief*, Polkinghorne argues for the plausibility of the *Creed*'s various statements.[49] His effort, unlike the process conclusions of Barbour, is "fairly orthodox."[50] In these lectures Polkinghorne lays out multiple parallels between science and Christianity and, in doing so, attempts to set Christian theology and scientific theory on a similar footing. Speaking of these lectures, Paul Helm suggests, "it would be too strong a thesis to say that he thinks that science confirms the Christian faith, too weak to say that science illuminates or illustrates it."[51] As the title of one of Polkinghorne's books puts it, science and theology are interested in, *The Way the World Is*.[52] Neither science nor theology "is based on incontrovertible grounds of knowledge," he writes. "Yet both can, I believe, lay claim to achieving a critical realism."[53] Polkinghorne argues that critical realism is more than naïve realism because it holds that "knowledge is not directly obtained by looking at what is going on, but it requires a subtle and creative interaction between interpretation and experiment."[54] This aversion to naïve realism is evident when he says that both science and theology demand "a corrigible point of view as a necessary starting-point in

---

[49]John Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief* (London: SPCK, 1994).

[50]Paul Helm, review of *Science and Christian Belief*, by John Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief* 7 (1995): 60.

[51]Ibid.

[52]John Polkinghorne, *The Way the World Is* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

[53]Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality*, 1.

[54] John Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 17.

the search for truth."[55] Just as science sometimes speaks of entities that are not directly observable, but which are nevertheless real, theology also speaks of an entity, namely God, who may not be observed (at least not in the way one typically thinks of observation) but who is likewise real. Science engages the world as it presents itself, and theology also engages and attempts to reflect reality, namely, the divine. Theology may no more be seen as ungrounded speculation than science. They are both interested in reality, albeit different layers of reality; thus, the two "for all their contrasts of subject matter and all their consequent differences in method, are indeed cousins under the skin."[56]

Polkinghorne sees a natural order to the world. While the ways in which humans describe that order are fallible, some real order that humans perceive rather than create must nevertheless be acknowledged. The inevitability of this acknowledgement is for Polkinghorne rooted in the success of science, an argument that is used by other realists. Regarding this evidence for critical realism, Polkinghorne opines,

> The naturally convincing explanation of the success of science is that it is gaining a tightening grasp of actual reality. The true goal of scientific endeavor is understanding the structure of the physical world, an understanding which is never complete but ever capable of further improvement. The terms of that understanding are dictated by the way things are.[57]

 Commenting on this line of thought from Polkinghorne, McGrath points out that while some argue that there is no natural order but only the human imposition of order, such a view "rests upon a series of historical improbabilities. Time and time again, it is the neat

---

[55]Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality*, 1.

[56]Ibid., 19.

and ordered theories of human beings which have come to grief against the sheer intractability of the observational evidence."[58]

Arthur Peacocke

Born in 1925 Arthur Peacocke studied at Oxford, receiving a Ph.D. in physical biochemistry (1948). Over the years he turned to theology as a compliment to his scientific pursuits and in 1963 received a diploma in theology from Birmingham University. In 1971 his journey into the religious world was on full display as he became an ordained priest in the Church of England. In 1973 he was awarded a Bachelor's of Divinity, also from Birmingham. As with Barbour and Polkinghorne, Peacocke's interest in both science and theology led naturally to an interest in the relationship between these disciplines.

Peacocke takes a decidedly realist position and does not mind placing himself in the modern camp. He writes, "I have found science to be a bulwark against those forms of postmodernism (which turn out to be most of them!) that undermine any realist reference, certainly within science itself. The success of science in prediction and control seems to me, as it does to most scientists, a sufficient validation of the reality of that to which scientific terms refer."[59] While not all critical realists describe themselves in these

---

[57]John Polkinghorne, *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 22.

[58]McGrath, *Science and Religion*, 220.

[59]Arthur Peacocke, "Reflections on the Responses," in *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 185.

strong modernist terms, there is a common agreement among them that postmodernism has fallen short in a number of fundamental areas.

Critical realism plays a monumental role in this scientist-theologian's work. Peacocke favors it as "a working philosophy of practising scientists who aim to depict reality but know only too well their fallibility in doing so."[60] Regarding theology, he urges that "critical realism is also the most appropriate and adequate philosophy concerning religious language and theological propositions."[61] The partial and revisable nature of theological models almost requires something like a critical realism. "Theological concepts and models should be regarded as partial, inadequate and revisable but necessary and, indeed, the only ways of referring to the reality that is named as 'God' and to God's relation with humanity."[62]

His published Mendenhall Lectures from 1983 is the most fruitful place to investigate Peacocke's early thoughts on critical realism.[63] Peacocke, like other critical realists, understands it to be a necessary adjustment to the popular and intuitive view of knowledge and reality. This "received view," or naïve realism, "was neatly quarantined from the influences of the social context in which scientists worked and from their whole worldview."[64] Nevertheless, with these influences now in view, due in no small part to

---

[60]Arthur Peacocke, *God and Science: A Quest of Christian Credibility* (London: SCM, 1996), 5.

[61]Ibid, 6.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Arthur Peacocke, *Intimations of Reality: Critical Realism in Science and Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

[64]Ibid., 18.

the work of Thomas Kuhn,[65] a strong program in the sociology of knowledge arose.

Peacocke points to the work of Michael J. Mulkay as one example of this trend. Mulkay

contends that scientific knowledge

> offers an account of the physical world which is mediated through available cultural
> resources; and these resources are in no way definitive. . . . The physical world
> could be analyzed perfectly adequately by means of language and presuppositions
> quite different from those employed in the modern scientific community. *There is,
> therefore, nothing in the physical world which uniquely determines the conclusions
> of that community*. . . . There is no alternative but to regard the products of science
> as social constructions like all other cultural products. . . . One of the central claims
> of the revised view is that scientific assertions are socially created and not directly
> given by the physical world as previously supposed.[66]

If these assertions are true, there is an obvious divide between science and reality, if there

is such a thing as reality, yet Peacocke finds in certain forms of scientific realism "an

impressive and equally 'strong' alternative to the implicit relativism of this sociological

viewpoint."[67] As with Barbour, critical realism became for Peacocke a middle way

between two extremes. The older naïve realism had been rendered "untenable" by the

early twentieth-century revolution in physics, but neither would the account of science

given by the sociologists of knowledge accurately portray the actual practice and success

of science.[68] While certain sociologists of knowledge were absolutely correct to point out

the situated nature of science and the cultural influences upon scientific conclusions, they

were not warranted in their conclusion that knowledge is entirely a construct. The

---

[65]Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific* Revolutions, 3rd ed. (Chicago
and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[66]Michael J. Mulkay, *Science and the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Allen
& Unwin, 1979), 59-60, quoted in Peacocke, *Intimations of Reality*, 20.

[67]Peacocke, *Intimations*, 21.

[68]Ibid., 23.

predictive power of science is strong evidence against such an idea.[69] Peacocke relies on

Hacking to make this point:

> There are surely innumerable entities and processes that humans will never know about. Perhaps there are many that in principle we can never know about. Reality is bigger than us. The best kinds of evidence for the reality of a postulated or inferred entity is that we can begin to measure it or otherwise understand its causal powers. The best evidence, in turn, that we have this kind of understanding is that we can set out, from scratch, to build machines that will work fairly reliably, taking advantage of this or that causal nexus. Hence, engineering, not theorizing, is the best proof of scientific realism about entities.[70]

For Peacocke it is not only science that investigates the real world that is defended by

Hacking; theology, too, seeks knowledge about reality. Granted, the two use different

sources and methods, for they investigate different *levels* of reality.[71] However, there is

no reason to privilege the method of the natural sciences as the sole path to knowledge.

Theological knowledge, like scientific knowledge, is tentative, but it is nevertheless more

than a mere human construct. The best alternative for Peacocke is therefore "a

defensible, nonnaive scientific realism," a *critical* realism.[72]

Thomas Torrance

Unlike the three previous thinkers in the science-theology dialogue, Thomas

Torrance was trained first as a theologian, not a scientist. The child of missionary

---

[69]Ibid., 25-26.

[70]Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 275, quoted in Peacocke, *Intimations*, 29.

[71]Peacocke, *Intimations*, 36-37. Similarly to Bhaskar, Peacocke finds in a hierarchical reality (or stratified reality as Bhaskar puts it) a reason to reject the reductionist position that claims the natural sciences own the corner when it comes to the path to knowledge. "There is no sense in which subatomic particles are to be graded as 'more real' than, say, a bacterial cell or a human person, or even social facts (or God?)" (ibid., 36).

parents, Torrance was born in China in 1913. By the late 1930s he was a student of Karl

Barth.[73] While Torrance was a lifelong disciple of Barth, his own work is full of unique

contributions to the field. An account of his theological accomplishment would go well

beyond the scope of this paper, but his ideas on science and theology must be mentioned,

especially in view of his strong commitment to scientific and theological realism.

> Early in his career Torrance's attention was focused on historical theology,[74]

but it is commonly agreed that his most significant contribution comes in his work on the

nature of theology.

> He argues that theology is just as much a science as physics: each works from an
> objective foundation, the latter from the natural world, and the former from God's
> self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God. Thus, theology has a
> legitimate place within the field of rational knowledge. The seeming differences
> between theology and natural science stem from the differences between their
> respective objects.[75]

Torrance is a realist; indeed, McGrath points to Torrance as "perhaps the most

theologically rigorous exponent of a realist approach to issues in science and theology."[76]

The objects of science and theology are *not* human constructs; while they each may

---

[72]Ibid., 23.

[73]Indeed, Torrance would go on to edit the English version of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 4 vols. in 14 parts (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-75).

[74]Early works include Thomas F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth, 1949) and idem, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958).

[75]D. A. Currie, "Thomas Forsyth Torrance," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1209-10.

[76]McGrath, *Reality*, 205.

require their own particular methods of inquiry, they are nevertheless real. Torrance explains,

> The concept of truth enshrines at once the real being of things and the revelation of things as they are in reality. The truth of being comes to bear in its own light and in its own authority, constraining us by the power of what it is to assent to it and acknowledge it for what it is in itself. St Anselm, who developed that further in a more realist way, held truth to be the reality of things as they actually are independent of us before God, and therefore as they ought to be known and signified by us.[77]

McGrath discerns in this passage from Torrance "an almost moral imperative" to properly respond to reality.[78] He understands Torrance to say "it is necessary and proper to be attentive and responsive to things as they actually are, and to ensure that we do all that we can to give accurate and objective accounts of things, in a manner appropriate to the reality being investigated."[79] This is not to say that Torrance has a simple view of how human concepts correspond to reality. He is far from the position McGrath calls "scientific positivism,"[80] the view that argues for an unmediated path from experience to

---

[77]T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), 141, quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 212.

[78]McGrath, *Torrance*, 212. The realism to which Torrance points is for Achtemeier "an indispensable presupposition for the church's proclamation of the Gospel." P. Mark Achtemeier, "The Truth of Tradition: Critical Realism in the Thought of Alasdair MacIntryre and T. F. Torrance," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994): 355. He writes, "If the knowledge, 'That I belong body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ' [from question one of *The Heidelberg Catechism*], is to be capable of offering concrete assurance about the eternal destiny of ordinary believers, such knowledge must of necessity be grounded in a reality (Jesus Christ) which transcends the particularities of the believer's own body, soul, and historical circumstances. A realism like Torrance's would seem to be essential if the church's witness is to be taken seriously" (ibid.).

[79]McGrath, *Torrance*, 212.

[80]Ibid., 217.

concepts. Rather, McGrath thinks Torrance's position is "perhaps best described as 'critical realism.'"[81]

McGrath is not alone in his assessment of Torrance. Achtemeier also finds *critical* realism in Torrance's work.[82] While Torrance's thought is clearly realist, it is not naively so. Rather, he acknowledges what he calls the "social coefficient of knowledge," which is a reference to the framework that a community sets for its members, a framework "within which meaning emerges."[83] Torrance explains:

> There is an inescapable need for a social coefficient of knowledge in order to establish and maintain semantic relations with reality, within which man can be at home in the universe, through being rightly related to its essential patterns and intrinsic intelligibilities which are the ground of meaning. It is within this framework that human conceptions are constantly formed, patterns of thought take shape, and the anticipatory grip upon reality which initiates inquiry is gained.[84]

It does seem that defending realism against certain critics becomes much easier when something like Torrance's coefficient of knowledge is acknowledged. Whether the two are compatible will, again, be the subject of the analysis found in chapter 4.[85]

So far, critical realism has been shown to be of historical interest in the general debate about human knowledge and of particular use in the science-theology dialogue. A diverse group of scholars including the philosopher Roy Sellars, process

---

[81]Ibid. McGrath goes on to link Torrance's general position with that of N. T. Wright.

[82]Achtemeier, "The Truth of Tradition," 355-374.

[83]Ibid.

[84]Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 102, quoted in Achtemeier, "The Truth of Tradition," 360.

[85]For more on Torrance's theology, especially his thought about human knowledge of God and the scientific status of theology, see John Douglas Morrison,

theologian Ian Barbour, the more conservative John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke, and

evangelical Thomas Torrance have each put the methodological tool of critical realism to

use in their respective fields and projects. Critical realism's story, however, does not end

here.

Critical Realism in Christian Hermeneutics

The diverse applicability of critical realism is further evidenced by the

presence of critical realist views in the world of biblical exegesis and the other

theological disciplines. This somewhat independent development in critical realist

thought plays a fairly small role in McGrath's *A Scientific Theology*.[86] And yet once

McGrath moves on from issues of prolegomena to the more specific issues of the

theological task, which he certainly plans to do, he will find critical realism already at

work, in at least a limited way.

Theological realists, those who believe that God is independently real and not

a human construct, differ in their understandings of Scripture. Those who believe that

Scripture is the primary source (or at least one among several crucial sources) when it

comes to knowledge of the real God are, of course, interested in the *interpretation* of

Scripture. Because the real God is encountered in Scripture, questions relating to the

---

Knowledge of the Self-Revealing God in the Thought of Thomas Forsyth Torrance, Issues in Systematic Theology, vol. 2, ed. Paul D. Molnar (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

[86]McGrath does interact with Wright on a number of other topics. Alister E. McGrath, "Reality, Symbol and History: Theological Reflections on N. T. Wright's Portrayal of Jesus," in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 159-79.

interpretation of Scripture cannot be ignored; to do so puts the outcome of one's theological study at risk of devising an account of a fictional god.

The biblical scholars now utilizing critical realism do not do so in relation to the work of Sellars or the scientist-theologians mentioned above. In the *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation*, Thorsten Moritz gives an account of the current place of critical realism in biblical studies, locating their critical realist roots in the work of Bernard Lonergan and subsequent developments by Ben Meyer and N. T. Wright.[87] Even though the writers most commonly associated with critical realism in biblical studies worked independently of developments outside the fields of philosophical and biblical hermeneutics, there is a parallel epistemological debate in each of these fields,[88] and some on each side end up working with a critical realist methodology.

Two prominent and influential critical realist approaches to New Testament studies are those of Ben Meyer and N. T. Wright. This section will begin with a delineation of critical realism in their works before moving on to look at critical realism in contemporary theology. Since Ben Meyer stands close in the background of N. T. Wright's work and was published before Wright, a treatment of his work will come first.

---

[87]While focusing on its presence in the field of biblical studies, Moritz writes that "critical realism essentially existed along with naïve realism as far back as pre-Enlightenment times." Thorsten Moritz, "Critical Realism," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 147.

[88]Moritz, "Critical Realism," 147.

Ben Meyer

        Canadian philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan was a significant influence on Ben Meyer, who applied critical realism, especially as developed by Lonergan, to the study of the New Testament. Lonergan (1904-1984) developed what he termed "a generalized empirical method," also known as critical realism, in his *Method in Theology*, where he offers a model for the task of theology. This model is not meant to be a description of reality itself but rather "an intelligible, interlocking set of terms and relations that it may be well to have about when it comes to describing reality or to forming hypotheses." [89]

        Commenting on Lonergan's role in his own project, Meyer writes, "I learned from Lonergan that besides the doctrinaire realism of average scholasticism there was a realism that made room with the idealists for every ambition of intelligence but that, correcting the concessions and oversights in idealist critique, went decisively beyond idealism as well."[90] Lonergan is not focused particularly on issues within New Testament studies, but his insights serve as a tool which Meyer finds quite helpful in his own field of study.

        In *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship*, which is essentially a work in philosophical hermeneutics, Meyer argues for textual meaning that is

---

[89]Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), xii. For more on Lonergan, see Philip McShane, *Language Truth and Meaning: Papers from The International Lonergan Congress 1970* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972); David Tracy, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970); Hugo A. Meynell, *The Theology of Bernard Lonergan*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion, vol. 42 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

independent of the reader. [91] Meyer's position is a kind of textual realism. Specifically,

Meyer avers that realism "signifies that, as the direct correlative of truth, reality is the

goal of the drive to know."[92] Additionally, along with other forms of critical realism, a

qualification comes with this basic assumption: there is no direct move from the senses to

reality. As Meyer explains, "It is perfectly true that what is sensed *is*, but this is

ascertained not by the senses but by understanding and judgments taking account of sense

data."[93] This core assumption is made by critical realists on all fronts. Reality is not

created; it simply *is*. Furthermore, reality may be perceived, but perception is mediated.

For Meyer's project, the primary object of inquiry is the text of the New

Testament. Just as reality sets its own agenda in the work of other critical realists, the

text sets its own agenda for Meyer's approach to the New Testament. It "has a *prima

facie* claim on the reader, namely, to be construed in accord with its intended sense."[94]

An interpreter may arrive at a preliminary understanding of the meaning of a text, and

this preliminary conclusion will be guided by the interpreter's preunderstanding, but the

process does not conclude at such an uncertain point. "If the interpreter conjures up the

meaning of the text out of his own resources, he does not simply leave it at that, but goes

on to a kind of critical reflection—Is this the meaning that the text is aiming at? What

---

[90]Ben Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1989), ix-x.

[91]Ben Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), viii.

[92]Ibid., 198.

[93]Ibid., xi. Emphasis added.

[94]Ibid.

textual warrants make this meaning probable? With what measure of assurance?—that

contributes to reasonable, probable, judgment."[95] In other words, the interpreter is not

the sole manufacturer of the meaning of the text.

> It is unsatisfactory that any meaning or value falling outside the purview of a cultivated contemporary sensibility should somehow without argument slip outside the pull of reality and float off into the weightlessness of fiction. If changing sensibility had the power to reduce to fiction whatever it no longer reverenced or believed, the imposition of a plot on time would, for much of the contemporary world, be no more than a fiction. But changing sensibility—though it changes much, very much—has no such power. To assure our contemporaries that, when we say we can no longer believe this or that, we mean that some of our old fictions are obsolete and that we accordingly need new fictions with which to replace them, is to offer them a serpent in place of fish and stone in place of bread. Two things are missing here: a criterion for distinguishing between the fictional and the real and the will to insist on the distinction.[96]

For Meyer, as with other critical realists, "the pull of reality," if heeded, prevents one

from careening off into relativism. The fictional and the real are not to be equated, and

critical realism is part of the method that best distinguishes between the two. Critical

realism acknowledges that there is a way to make this distinction; indeed, the "criterion

of the real" is "its susceptibility to becoming known through true propositions."[97]

Here is yet another scholar employing critical realism for his unique project

and towards his unique conclusions. Indeed, Meyer thinks of his critical realism is an

"essentially open" tool that is "by no means limited to those sharing Lonergan's (and the

---

[95]Meyer, *Critical Realism*, xii.

[96]Ibid., 203.

[97]Ibid., xi. Meyer describes Scripture as "God's climatic and definitive revelation" and says its texts "are unique less for their literary excellence than for their unparalleled content and consequences." Meyer, *Reality and Illusion*, ix.

writer's) religious allegiances (specifically Catholic) or theological preferences."[98] This

open tool has also been employed by New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright.

N. T. Wright

N. T. Wright's three volume *Christian Origins and the Question of God* [99]

begins by setting up critical realism as a tool for the entire series. Whereas there is no

mention of critical realists like Sellars or the important names in the science-theology

dialogue in this introduction, Wright does note the critical realism of some who wrote

before him, acknowledging that while the term itself may not have been specifically used,

the necessary and sufficient elements of critical realism were present.[100] He had written

the first draft of *The New Testament and the People of God* when Ben Meyer's *Critical

Realism and the New Testament* was released. In that work, Wright found much of what

he was trying to articulate affirmed and defended.[101]

Reality, according to Wright, is viewed through the lens of one's particular

worldview, and it is critical realist epistemology that answers the difficult questions

---

[98]Meyer, *Reality and Illusion*, viii.

[99]N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, 3 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992-2003).

[100]See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). Wright says these two writers have shown that "a tacit and pre-theoretical point of view is itself a necessary condition for any perception and knowledge to occur at all." N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God,* Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol.1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 36.

[101]Ibid., 32.

raised by that fact.[102] Of particular importance is the question of how textual meaning, independent of the reader (provided there is such a meaning), might have an independent existence apart from the worldview of the reader. Post-Enlightenment positivism (or naïve realism) ignores the fact that people know things in relation to, and never divorced from, their worldview. While it is true that this view has been largely modified in the academy as a response to the strong criticisms offered by postmodernists (and certainly most would consider logical positivism a thing of the past), positivist ideas nevertheless continue to saturate a significant sector of popular thought about science and language, even in the religious realm: "One meets it among naïve theologians, who complain that while other people have 'presuppositions,' they simply read the text straight, or who claim that because one cannot have 'direct access' to the 'facts' about Jesus, all that we are left with is a morass of first-century fantasy."[103] The common assumption of these two positions is that real knowledge requires full certainty. The positivist assumes that he has certainty because he has "laid aside his presuppositions" and examined just the facts. The postmodernist knows he does not have the full certainty of direct access to the object of his inquiry and, consequently, he denies historical claims altogether.

Wright considers another incorrect approach to be that of the phenomenalists; theirs is "the pessimistic side of the Enlightenment programme."[104] Phenomenology assumes that all one can know is one's own sense data. Skepticism as to the reality (i.e., whether there is one) behind that sense data permeates this view. The only hope Wright

---

[102]Ibid.

[103]Ibid., 33-34.

[104]Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 34.

sees in this method is solipsism.[105] He suggests, "When I seem to be looking at a text, or at an author's mind within the text, or at events of which the text seems to be speaking, all I am really doing is seeing the author's view of events, or the text's appearance of authorial intent, or maybe only my own thoughts in the presence of the text . . . and is it even a text?"[106]

Wright chooses the tool of critical realism as the best and most helpful alternative to the deeply problematic methods of positivism, postmodernism, and phenomenology.   It is not that these approaches say nothing that is true; rather, they leave certain questions unanswered and a number of problems unaddressed (problems that a critical realist position addresses). Critical realism acknowledges the influence of the perceiver, or the reader, on what is perceived, or read, departing from the naïveté of post-Enlightenment positivism and avoiding the phenomenalist tendency towards solipsism. Critical realism allows one to make initial observations of a text or of some other object while admitting that those observations can and must then be challenged by critical thought. For example, one may reflectively wonder, "how is my situatedness affecting this observation?" Furthermore, critical realism allows that the observation can survive the criticism "and speak truly of reality."[107] This means that all conclusions are provisional, but at the same time are valuable; they are not mere inventions. Critical interaction with these conclusions will yield stories and, on a larger scale, worldviews that more closely mirror reality.

---

[105]Ibid., 35

[106]Ibid., 34-35.

[107]Ibid., 36.

Within this context of an emphasis on the storied nature of reality and on worldviews, Wright makes his most important contribution. For him, worldviews are normative; that is, they, and the smaller stories within them, "claim to make sense of the whole of reality."[108] Oftentimes, however, stories and worldviews collide, and each may rule out various parts of the other. Only several approaches adequately deal with these collisions.[109] If the new story cannot logically fit into one's existing story, one may on sufficient grounds (1) reject the new story; (2) accept it, abandoning or altering the old one; or (3) tell an even newer story that makes better sense of the other two.

It should be noted, contends Wright, storytelling is not left up to one's mere whims and preferences. New stories are not good unless they make better sense of *reality*.[110] Distancing himself from modernist ideas about *proving* these worldviews, Wright is careful to say, "There is no such thing as 'neutral' or 'objective' proof; only the claim that the story we are now telling about the world as a whole makes more sense, in its outline and detail, than other potential or actual stories that may be on offer. Simplicity of outline, elegance in handling the details within it, the inclusion of all the parts of the story, and the ability of the story to make sense beyond its immediate subject-matter: these are what counts."[111] Critical realist methodology is useful in working, revising, and clarifying until these elements are present.

Wright's critical realist method of reading texts is consistently undergirded by an emphasis on worldview and the storied nature of reality. Without awareness of one's

---

[108]Ibid., 41.

[109]See his discussion, ibid., 42.

[110]Reality includes, where appropriate, the intended meaning of texts.

stories and, on the larger scale, one's worldview, reading is significantly distanced from the author and from the text's meaning. For Wright, the sounder the worldview from which one reads, the more acurate that reading will be. Everyone comes to the text with one story or several stories that help comprise their worldview. As finite creatures, humans often believe stories that are not closely connected with reality; such stories, Wright claims, are nothing more than "snakes in the grass."[112] Critical realism recognizes and counters this phenomenon, as Write explains,

> What we need, I suggest, is a *critical-realist account of the phenomenon of reading, in all its parts*. To one side we can see the positivist or the naïve realist, who move so smoothly along the line from reader to text to author to referent that they are unaware of the snakes in the grass at every step; to the other side we can see the reductionist who, stopping to look at snakes is swallowed up by them and proceeds no further. Avoiding both these paths, I suggest that we must articulate a theory which locates the entire phenomenon of text-reading within an account of the storied and relational nature of human consciousness. . . . What we need, then, is a theory of reading which, at the reader/text stage, will do justice *both* to the fact that the reader is a particular human being *and* to the fact that the text is an entity on its own, not a plastic substance to be moulded to the reader's whim.[113]

In these and other passages from Wright, the central themes of critical realism are clearly displayed, applied specifically to his interests in Biblical studies. Realism demands that the reader honor the intention of the author and the historical reality contemporaneous to

---

[111]Ibid.

[112]Ibid., 61

[113]Ibid. Later he writes, "We must renounce the fiction of a god's-eye view of events on the one hand and a collapsing of events into significance or perception on the other. . . . The text can be listened to on its own terms, without being reduced to the scale of what the reader can or cannot understand at the moment. If it is puzzling, the good reader will pay it the compliment of struggling to understand it [thus his 'hermeneutics of love'], of living with it and continuing to listen. But however close the reader gets to understanding the text, the reading will still be peculiarly that reader's reading: the subjective is never lost, nor is it necessary or desirable that it should be" (ibid., 63-64).

the text, yet the storied, worldview-dependent nature of reality demands a distancing

from naïve readings and an acceptance of critical realism.[114]

Recent Evangelical Hermeneutics

       Critical realism shows up in evangelical methodology most notably in the

widespread evangelical agreement on the effects of human situatedness on the entire

theological process, a technical process that moves through several steps, including

exegetical theology, biblical theology, historical theology, and systematic theology. This

realty of human situatedness is most often described in terms of the "preunderstanding"

that the theologian or exegete brings to the theological task.[115]

---

[114]Wright's position almost seems to be naturally intuitive among biblical scholars. For example, critical realist assumptions are evident in the recent work of Tom Schreiner, though he does not use the term critical realism. Schreiner contends, "We understand each of the pieces in the NT by our understanding of the whole, by our worldview, by our own metanarrative. We can fall into the illusion that if we study a 'part,' then we are dealing with just the 'evidence,' 'the hard phenomena' of the text. But our understanding of any piece of evidence is also affected by our standpoint, our worldview. We do not assess any piece of evidence from a neutral and objective standpoint. Hence, there is a dialogue between the inductive and deductive that constantly occurs. If we do not venture to consider NT theology as a whole, we are in danger of skewing the particular piece of evidence that we study. Examining the NT thematically, then, may assist us in understanding the pieces that make up the NT." Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 11. Another example of this can be found in Grant Osborne's robust account of theological interpretation, which is grounded in critical realist assumptions. Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

[115]This concept of preunderstanding and its effects on interpretation, while acknowledged by many contemporary evangelicals, has a longstanding place in the wider history of biblical interpretation and general hermeneutics. Thiselton suggests that Friedrich Schleiermacher is likely the first person to fold a theory of preunderstanding into a general theory of interpretation. Anthony Thiselton, "Hermeneutical Circle," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 281. For Schleiermacher, understanding a text necessarily works in a circular process, a principle which he seems to have understood in several different

For evangelicals Jason S. DeRouchie and Jason C. Meyer, interpretive

grids—preunderstandings—can cause a number of interpretive problems, yet the

phenomenon of preunderstanding cannot be ignored or denied. It is a kind of brute fact

in interpretive theory, and it is only when one's preunderstanding is acknowledged and

malleable, open to reform by the text itself, that understanding of the text thrives.

Specifically, they write,

> There is a vital connection between one's individual exegetical decisions and one's collective interpretive framework. In other words, one's handling of specific texts has direct influence in the shaping of one's overall interpretive grid, and one's interpretive grid can have determinative effects on one's individual interpretations. We are not questioning the viability of operating with an interpretive framework;

---

ways. Ibid., 281-82. He first talks about the hermeneutical circle as the movement one makes from understanding the parts of a text to understanding the whole of the text. These two understandings cannot be reached apart from one another. For example, as one reads a book there may be passages that do not make sense, but as the reader presses on, completing the book, he gets a general sense of the whole book. Upon a second reading the reader will understand at least some of the passages that were at first an enigma and this adds to his understanding of the whole, which in turn will add to his understanding of even more enigmatic passages upon a third reading. "Only in the case of insignificant texts are we satisfied with what we understand on first reading." Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Hand-Written Manuscripts,* trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman, ed. Heinz Kimmerle (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977), 113. This movement from parts to whole and back again, a movement which can take place as many times as one chooses to read a given text, is the "hermeneutical circle." For Schleiermacher, the principle of the hermeneutical circle "is of such consequence for hermeneutics and so incontestable that one cannot even begin to interpret without using it." Ibid., 196. Schleiermacher also talks about the hermeneutical circle in terms of the back and forth movement from one's immediate world, the total understanding or body of knowledge he brings to the text (i.e. his preunderstanding), and the world of the text itself. The text may affect and change one's preunderstanding and thus upon a second reading the text is understood differently. Yet, it is not only the text that can play such a role; other learning experiences, especially other texts, can also affect one's interpretation. The goal, however, is for these experiences to improve one's grasp of the text rather than distort it. "Thus Schleiermacher valued 'NT Introduction' because on the one hand it engaged with the occasion for writing and the author's distinctive theology, and on the other hand with the grammatical and lexicographical details needed to test or correct provisional understandings of this larger picture." Thiselton, "Hermeneutical Circle," 282.

such a grid can help orient seemingly obscure texts within the grand narrative of Scripture. This interplay need not be a vicious circle, as long as the reader intentionally allows the details of each text to exercise a healthy amount of hermeneutical control that can either further confirm the framework or critique it and challenge it. However, one must stringently avoid imposing one's overall framework (i.e., eisegesis) upon the text so that the details of the text are conveniently muted or minimized. Interpretive grids wreak hermeneutical havoc when they blind the interpreter from seeing what is really there in each individual text (i.e., exegesis).[116]

Evangelicals Robertson McQuilkin and Bradford Mullen consider the recognition of preunderstanding's influence to have always been a part of historically evangelical biblical interpretation:

> Although Scripture is infallible, one's interpretation of it is not infallible in every detail because understanding is limited by one's preunderstanding, spiritual receptivity, level of intellectual acumen, mastery of and faithful adherence to the disciplines of hermeneutics (classically defined) and the amount of hard work invested in the effort.[117]

For McQuilkin and Mullen, postmodern perspectives "have sensitized us to the difficulty of verbal communication, alerted us to the nearly imperceptible influence of preunderstanding, and caused us to reevaluate the historical and cultural distance between Scripture and us. As a result we examine more carefully our own cultural and theological

---

[116]Jason S. DeRouchie and Jason C. Meyer, "Christ or Family as the "Seed" of Promise? An Evaluation of N. T. Wright on Galatians 3:16," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14, no.3 (2010): 42. DeRouchie and Meyer apply this insight specifically to N. T. Wright's reading of a text in Galatians: "It is noteworthy that Wright's reading of Gal 3:16 bears a striking resemblance to his reading of other texts in Paul that have come to form the essence of his overall interpretive framework. This grid, which fits the broad contours of the so-called New Perspective on Paul, tends to place stress upon the ecclesiological aspects of Paul's thought, while minimizing many traditional soteriological readings of texts in Paul" (ibid.).

[117]Robertson McQuilkin and Bradford Mullen, "The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 69.

preunderstanding and are more modest in our claims to infallible interpretations."[118] And

yet, although preunderstanding limits understanding, interpreters are not necessarily

doomed to subjectivism in interpretation. The Bible,

> presents itself throughout as a revelation of truth, not as an imprecise pointer toward
> an obscure reality. If we do not do interpretation on the premise that God has spoken
> and that he can be understood, that truth about him can be communicated accurately
> in words, we run the danger of ending up where postmodern thinking has taken
> some proponents: speaking nonsense. That is, they use words in an attempt to
> communicate their own thought about how impossible communication with words
> is.[119]

For those entrenched in the postmodern worldview, these presuppositions play a decisive

role in the interpretive process, so much so that there is no one correct interpretation of a

given text.[120] Nevertheless, Evangelicals have suggested that the presence of multiple

interpretations does not mean that there are multiple meanings in a text. It is unwarranted

to move from the descriptive fact that people interpret Scripture differently to the

conclusion that there is no correct interpretation.

D. A. Carson is another evangelical who accepts the existence and influence

of preunderstanding over biblical interpretation. Carson recognizes how a drive to

maintain one's own tradition can make fallacious exegesis all the more possible,[121] and

---

[118]Ibid., 71.

[119]Ibid., 75.

[120]As Vanhoozer stresses, "Postmodern readers come to Scripture with a plurality of interpretive interests, including (perhaps) the theological, though no one interest may claim more authority than another." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Introduction," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic,2005), 20.

[121]D.A. Carson mentions specifically the tendency to appeal to unlikely or even unknown word meanings in order to maintain one's previous theological commitments. He writes, "There are many examples of this . . . fallacy. Some spring from poor research, perhaps dependence on others without checking the primary sources;

he contends therefore that each interpretation must be held in strict conformity to the

biblical text. While the goal of exegesis is to draw out the meaning of the biblical text,[122]

Carson acknowledges that an uncritical handling of the Bible often results in readers

hearing in the text only what they have been told is there rather than the realities of the

text itself. He summarizes this issue:

> It is too easy to read the traditional interpretations we have received from others into the text of Scripture. Then we may unwittingly transfer the authority of Scripture to our traditional interpretations and invest them with a false, even idolatrous, degree of certainty. Because traditions are reshaped as they are passed on, after a while we may drift far from God's word while insisting all our theological opinions are 'biblical' and therefore true. If when we are in such a state we study the Bible uncritically, more than likely it will simply reinforce our errors. If the Bible is to accomplish its work of continual reformation—reformation of our lives and our doctrine—we must do all we can to listen to it afresh and to utilize the best resources at our disposal.[123]

To avoid these tendencies to flee the meaning and power of the text, Carson suggests that

a carefully defined exegetical plan must be in place, one that includes not only exegetical

tools and rules but also careful attention to those areas where interpreters often

misunderstand how exegetical guidelines are to be applied.[124] Of course, questions can

also be raised about proper exegetical method. A quick perusal of commentary on a

particular passage of Scripture from commentaries written over the last fifty years will

---

others spring from the desire to make a certain interpretation work out, and the interpreter forsakes evenhandedness." D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 38.

[122]Critical scholars and evangelicals have some obvious differences when it comes to the method of exegesis.   The critical approach has had a "tendency to treat the biblical texts as sources for reconstructing human history and religion rather than as texts that testify to God's presence and action in history" (Vanhoozer, "Introduction," 20).

[123]Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 17-18.

reveal certain presuppositions, not only about the biblical text, but also about the rules of exegesis itself. The task and rules of biblical interpretation are still developing, and many evangelicals would contend that the interpreter must not only to be open to the possibility of some of his theological opinions being incorrect but also to the possibility of some of his exegetical assumptions and practices being incorrect. Carson laments,

> Like much of our theology, our exegetical practices in most cases have been passed on to us by teachers who learned them many years earlier. Unless both our teachers and we ourselves have kept up, it is all too likely that our exegetical skills have not been honed by recent developments. . . . The sum total of all useful exegetical knowledge did not reach its apex during the Reformation, nor even in the past century. As much as we can and must learn from our theological forebearers, we face the harsh realities of this century; and neither nostalgia nor the preferred position of an ostrich will remove either the threats or the opportunities that summon our exegetical skills to new rigor.[125]

Theology begins with Scripture and is governed at all points by Scripture. Because the formulation of evangelical theology cannot be done apart from Scripture, evangelicals have paid detailed attention to the task of exegesis, to the task of extracting the meaning of the biblical text.[126]

Evangelicals currently differ, however, over the degree to which one's preunderstanding, especially one's theological preunderstanding, ought to play a role in

---

[124]Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies* highlights a number of ways poor exegesis hides the meaning of the Bible from its interpreters.

[125]Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies,* 20.

[126]The most likely origin of the English term exegesis is the Greek verbal form ἐξηγέομαι, which carries the basic meaning "to lead or carry out." In interpretive studies the term has come to denote the task of leading out or reading out the meaning of a text. For a basic introduction to the definition and task, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 41-51. Also see Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning,

the interpretive task.[127] Three major approaches to preunderstanding can be discerned in the current literature.

The first is exemplified by Grant Osborne who argues that the various theological disciplines must not be done independently of one another, as if they are linear and progressive steps, each of which must be conclusively completed before moving on to the next. In his view the theological process is a spiraled task wherein each theological discipline is revisited repeatedly in the interpretation of a single passage. In other words, Scripture is the starting point from which theology begins, and as theologians progress through the process of theologizing, they return to previous steps as new questions and insights arise. Osborne explains, "The argument of this book is that a lengthy 'spiral' from reading and study to interpretation is needed, that is going over and over the material using all the hermeneutical tools (within the context of critical realism) at our disposal and gradually coming to conclusions."[128] The key for Osborne is to understand that, while the meaning and contextualization of the Word of God is of upmost importance, the path toward this goal is not linear. Readers come to the text with a preunderstanding "by which we can make sense of what we read."[129] Our preunderstanding is not static, however, but rather influenced and shaped by later steps toward contextualization in the spiral. "As readers," argues Osborne, "we want to place ourselves in front of the text (and allow it to address us) rather than behind it (and force it

_____

Interpreting the New Testament: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 23-27.

[127]Where McGrath falls on this spectrum remains to be seen.

[128]Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 487.

to go where we want). The reader's background and ideas are important to the study of biblical truth; however, this must be used to study meaning rather than to create meaning that is not there."[130] Here Osborne serves as an example of one way evangelical theologians embrace critical realism, namely, by accepting the critical notion that our human situatedness affects our interpretation of biblical texts and theological outcomes.[131]

A second evangelical approach differs from Osborne significantly when it comes to bringing systematic preunderstandings (preunderstandings gleaned from the latter steps of the theological task) to the work of exegesis. These thinkers relegate most of the later steps of the theological process, especially the work of systematic theology, to the realm of application.[132] Consequently, systematic theology should not be brought, at

---

[129]Ibid., 29.

[130]Ibid.

[131]While this critical realist claim about the impossibility of neutral interpretation is often accepted by evangelicals, they reject the additional claim (made by postmodernists) that truth is consequently relative and that texts cannot be understood to reflect objective truths. For example, Justin Taylor writes, "Nothing could be clearer from the New Testament, it seems to me, than the idea that God has given us universally true doctrinal revelation that can be understood, shared, defended, and contextualized. 'The faith' has been once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). We are to guard 'the good deposit' entrusted to us (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14), instructing in 'sound doctrine' and rebuking contrary doctrine (Titus 1:9; 2:1). False doctrine is associated with conceit and ignorance (1 Tim. 6:3-4), and we are commanded not to be tossed to and fro by its winds (Eph. 4:14)." Justin Taylor, "An Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of This Book," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Errickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 31.

[132]According to this view, these later steps should play no role in interpreting the meaning of a given passage of Scripture—exegesis is the study of a particular passage of Scripture, its immediate context, and any pertinent antecedent texts and therefore a basic grammatical and historical study of any passage in question and any related

any stage of the exegetical task, to the interpretation of Scripture. Walter Kaiser exemplifies this view:

> Should someone complain that no Christian exegete can or should forget that part of the Bible which was completed after the text under investigation, we respond by saying, "Of course, no one expects the exegete to do that." Subsequent developments in the revelation of theology (subsequent to the passage we have under consideration) may (and should, in fact) be brought into our conclusion or summaries after we have firmly established on exegetical grounds precisely what the passage means. We do, in fact, have the whole Bible; and we are speaking (usually) to a Christian audience. Therefore, in our summaries we should point out these later developments for the sake of updating and putting everything in its fullest context. However, in no case must that later teaching be used exegetically (or in any other way) to unpack the meaning or to enhance the usability of the individual text which is the object of our study.[133]

Because systematic theology is addressing contemporary concerns, the danger according to Kaiser is that systematic theology's conclusions may be read back into various biblical passages. This is not to say that its conclusions are necessarily false, but they may not be rooted in the particular passages in which one is tempted to root them. Legitimate conclusions of systematic theologians about the Trinity, for example, might be read into Old Testament texts that are not relevant. "The sole object of the expositor is to explain as clearly as possible what the writer meant when he wrote the text under examination," writes Kaiser. "It is the interpreter's job to *represent the text*, not the prejudices, feelings, judgments, or concerns of the exegete. To indulge in the latter is to engage in eisegesis, 'a reading *into*' a text what the reader wants it to say."[134]

---

passages that were written *prior* to it are allowed into the content of one's preunderstanding and thus used in the exegetical task. Related passages that appear later in the biblical cannon, chronologically speaking, are not permitted a voice when determining the meaning of a text.

[133]Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 140.

[134]Ibid., 45.

Kaiser admits that exegetical theology cannot be done apart from biblical theology. Whereas biblical exegesis is the foundation from which evangelical theology begins, biblical theology is the first attempt to collect and systematically arrange properly interpreted biblical materials.[135] "Since its inception, biblical theology has had a strong diachronic strain that insists on tracing the historic development of doctrine as it appeared chronologically in the history of Israel and the church. Thus, while it had to be scriptural in *form* and *method* as well as in substance, it had to present itself in the order that God disclosed his revelation over the centuries or decades."[136] In this respect Kaiser agrees with seems to agree with Osborne's definition: Biblical theology is "the first step away from the exegesis of individual passages and toward the delineation of their significance for the church today."[137] Specifically, it investigates various themes as they appear in the major sections of the Bible.[138] So, for example, one might investigate the meaning of justification in Paul's letter to the Romans, or in all of Paul's epistles, or in Luke's gospel. Biblical theology may also investigate various themes across an entire testament, Old or New, and it remains tied to the biblical texts. Whereas systematic theology moves beyond the investigation of biblical themes to a contemporary contextualization of their

---

[135]Even though biblical theology is systematic, in this way it is to be distinguished from the discipline of systematic theology.

[136]Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Promise Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 18.

[137]Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 347.

[138]Evangelicals have defined biblical theology and systematic theology in slightly distinct ways. Thus, a slightly broader definition is offered here, one that will encompass these other definitions. For a sampling of definitions, see Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral,* 347-73, and D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

message, biblical theology typically offers no contextualization and stays within the

parameters of these smaller divisions, the theology of a whole testament being the

broadest.[139] Although it serves the contextualizing process that systematic theology

engages, biblical theology is not, Kaiser argues, contextualization.[140] This is likely the

reason Kaiser believes biblical theology remains in the arena of biblical studies, broadly

speaking, although it differs from exegesis of individual texts enough to warrant being

conceived as a discipline in and of itself. Those who allow the findings of biblical

theology into the exegetical task are at least in a very limited way recognizing the need

for adjusting one's preunderstanding according to information found outside the

immediate pericope being studied.[141]

    In a third approach, Robert Thomas completely rejects the idea that

---

[139]This is not to say that biblical theology never relates the themes from one author or division of Scripture to others. Those doing biblical theology are interested in development in the Bible, which is to be expected if progressive revelation is true, and thus they "try above all to uncover and understand how words and themes in earlier canonical text are used in later ones" (Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 101).

[140]In Osborne's terms, biblical theology "provides a bridge to systematic theology and the contextualization of Scripture" (Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 350).

[141]Of course, critical realism does not provide the contents of biblical theology or biblical exegesis, but it does seem to call for a spiraled process of moving outward and then back in to the text being studied, with one's preunderstanding hopefully coming closer to "the way things are" with each movement. The debate in contemporary evangelical method seems to be over how far out from the text the spiral can go before returning. In other words, how far into the other theological disciplines can one forage for adjustments to one's preunderstanding before returning to the primary text being interpreted? Kaiser will not admit other theological disciplines such as historical or systematic theology into the exegetical process, but he nevertheless argues for "nothing less than a full involvement of biblical theology as a part of our exegesis." Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 137. He says specifically that the main contribution of biblical theology should be to the task of exegesis and not to systematic theology (ibid., 137-38).

preunderstanding necessarily affect interpretation. His evaluation arises in his appraisal of what he perceives to be a new tendency toward subjectivism in some types of evangelical hermeneutics. "The root difference," between the older, more traditional hermeneutics and the new hermeneutics is that the new "places the step of preunderstanding at the head of the interpretive process."[142] Furthermore, he contends, "By bringing preunderstanding to bear on interpretation at the outset of the process, interpreters are starting with contemporary considerations rather than those connected with the initial setting of a passage."[143] Thomas even suggests that the admission that interpretive conclusions are tentative due to the fact that they are influenced by one's preunderstanding is admitting the viability of some form of relativism, which "leads easily to divesting Scripture of any value in stating propositional truth."[144] He continues, "If allowed to progress to its logical end, however, this outlook may lead eventually to a realization that what we have considered to be cardinal dogmas—such as the deity of Christ, His second coming, and his substitutionary atonement—are merely myopic conclusions of Western, white, middle-class males. Such a hermeneutical approach would spell the end of meaningful Christian doctrine."[145]

While relativism is not a position that should be upheld, Thomas is wrong to equate it with the critical realist's recognition of the effect of preunderstanding on interpretation. Firstly, Thomas's concern that biblical interpreters who acknowledge that

---

[142]Robert L.Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 13.

[143]Ibid., 29.

[144]Ibid., 45.

[145]Ibid., 46.

they have a preunderstanding will focus their study on their preunderstanding rather than on the text is ill-founded. Acknowledging that one's preunderstanding affects one's reading of the biblical text in no way prevents one from starting interpretation with a verse or passage from Scripture. Thomas does not argue for his claim that one with a preunderstanding must necessarily focus his study on his preunderstanding, on something other than Scripture, and he provides no example of an interpreter who does so. Secondly, Thomas fails to address the clear arguments for the existence of preunderstanding.[146]

Even though it is true that one who admits the fact of preunderstanding in hermeneutics may take his study in an unhealthy direction, even towards the relativism that Thomas hopes to prevent, this implies nothing about the issue of preunderstanding itself. Any number of correct theories can be abused thereby precipitating interpretive disaster, but this says nothing about the correctness of those theories.[147] Just because biblical interpretation is made more complex and the task of theology is introduced to an increased and more obvious element of subjectivity, this does not mean that the fact of preunderstanding should be ignored. If it raises problems, this is all the more reason to acknowledge them and find constructive ways to deal with them.

Acknowledgement of the powerful influence that preunderstanding has on biblical interpretation need not, however, be connected with a skeptical stance as Thomas suggests. Understanding must take place within some context (i.e., within or from a

---

[146]For a critical review of Thomas's book and views on preunderstanding, see Peter H. Davids, review of *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, by Robert L. Thomas, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (2004): 492.

[147]To argue otherwise is to commit the informal slippery slope fallacy.

preunderstanding) but the interpreter is not forever bound to his particular preunderstanding. As Wayne Strickland suggests, "the key to maintaining objectivity in the interpretive process while also recognizing the validity of preunderstanding is to recognize that the preunderstanding of the interpreter is not to be regarded as *final*. It must remain open to revision and modification by the text in order to avoid eisegesis. The biblical text must be the final authority over preunderstanding."[148]

To dismiss the issue of preunderstanding is to avoid a major step towards progress along the hermeneutical spiral. As the theologian progresses toward an understanding of the text, he has to begin from somewhere; indeed, his own preconceptions are the only starting point he has. Perhaps the preunderstanding he brings to the interpretive task does not adequately account for the reality or veracity of the biblical text; he cannot, however, realistically begin his inquiry from anywhere else. While in the process of interpreting a text, the reader's preunderstanding is affecting his interpretation; yet, simultaneously, the text is affecting his preunderstanding, provided that he is reasonably open to learning. Thus, "A reader may approach a text without presupposing the results of reading, but the same reader will never engage a text without some preunderstanding, some specific questions about the text, or some idea about what the text itself is about."[149] Accepting the role of preunderstanding in hermeneutics does not necessitate that preunderstanding be the initial or primary subject in biblical interpretation. Preunderstandings change over the course of study and they change upon

---

[148]Wayne G. Strickland, "Preunderstanding and Daniel Fuller's Law-Gospel Continuum," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (April 1987): 181.

[149]W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 220.

encountering the living spirit of Christ. As to the former, the biblical text is what receives the vast majority of the interpreter's attention in biblical studies, not the interpreter's preunderstanding; Scripture is what governs theology. Thus, the attention that is given to one's preunderstanding is given, not merely to understand one's framework better, but so that the biblical text might be better understood.[150]

As for the latter impact of the Spirit on one's preunderstanding, Paul Jewett reminds those who fear the negative effects of preunderstanding that, "To be in Christ is to be a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17); and this includes a radical remaking of the pre-understanding with which we come to the text that bears witness to him."[151] He continues,

> The traditional doctrine of the illumination of the Spirit does not deny that the interpreter comes to the text with a pre-understanding. But it does say that, at the deepest level, this pre-understanding is not simply corrected, much less confirmed, by the text. It is rather shattered by the text, and this new understanding of the text brings with it a new self-understanding on the part of the interpreter. Such an approach deprives ordinary methodology of its security, since it is an approach derived, not from the worldview of the interpreter, but from the text; or better, from the One who reveals himself in the text. Being able to comprehend the mystery of God in Christ, as revealed in Scripture, requires that one be enabled by the work of the Spirit to receive that revelation. Not that the Spirit bypasses human reason, but he makes reason a reason that perceives the truth rather than one that defines truth. No longer does the interpreter read Scripture for what she wants to find; rather, she listens to Scripture for what she was once afraid to hear.[152]

Despite concerns over abuse of the concept of preunderstanding, total dismissal of the notion of preunderstanding in biblical exegesis is impossible.

---

[150]Attention to issues of preunderstanding is only one part in the comprehensive effort to understand the biblical text; it is a small but necessary part for those who wish to do exegesis rather than eisegesis.

[151]Paul K. Jewett, *God, Creation, and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 156.

Since reality is infinite, no person can reach outside the realm of time and space to give an objective account of reality. As part of the structure of reality, I can never completely escape the present. I am always being affected by my present horizon of understanding, a horizon within which and from which all things are intelligible to me. Without this horizon of understanding, this world of preunderstanding, discovering meaning would simply be impossible. Without preunderstanding, understanding is impossible.[153]

Tate is arguing here that claiming that one approaches interpretation without preunderstanding is the equivalent of saying one approaches interpretation with an empty mind, a claim that would be impossible to defend.

In summary, evangelicals have some disagreement over the critical realist acceptance of preunderstanding in interpretation. And yet, Thomas's concerns aside, there is general agreement that one's preunderstanding always plays some role in interpretation, a fact that critical realism acknowledges as unavoidable. Being situated is part of living, and one's situatedness does affect one's view of objective reality, including the objective meaning of Scripture. While critical realism acknowledges this phenomena, it also demonstrates that our contextualization is not necessarily an obstruction to the discipline and to obtaining an objective grasp of reality. Cultural embeddedness would be a complete hindrance only if preunderstandings were permanent and unalterable. This is not the case, however: one's preunderstanding can, over time as it conforms to reality in greater measures (under the guidance of Scripture and the Spirit of God), come to be more of an asset than a hindrance.

---

[152]Ibid., 156-57.

[153]Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 220.

Bhaskarian Critical Realism

In the entry on critical realism published in the *Rutledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the emphasis is entirely on the work of philosopher Roy Bhaskar and those who have been significantly influenced by his work.[154] Although the movement he unknowingly initiated has come to be called critical realism, and although it has certain obvious affinities with the other critical realisms discussed in this chapter, Bhaskar's work is highly original and shows no dependence on Sellar's philosophical musings, the science-religion dialogue, or the field of biblical studies. Some of the core elements overlap in these diverse forms of critical realism, but Bhaskar offers an independent, highly-detailed, and philosophical critical realism, introducing elements that are not present in other forms of critical realism. His work is so seminal that he is often credited to be "the originator of the philosophy of critical realism."[155] However critical realism is applied in the natural and social sciences, it is agreed that Bhaskar's work is decisive for the contemporary movement.

Bhaskar (b.1944) had an early interest in philosophy and in 1963 he began a course of study in philosophy, economics, and politics at Balliol College, Oxford. His doctoral work was also in economics. By 1973 he was teaching at Edinburgh and was about to publish the first phase of what is now called critical realism.[156]

---

[154]Andrew Collier, "Critical Realism," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 2:720-22.

[155]See the publisher's account of him in Roy Bhaskar, *From East to West: Odyssey of a Soul* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), i.

[156]Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 262-63.

Bhaskar did not intend to articulate a critical realist philosophy; rather, the term emerged from two of Bhaskar's projects. Bhaskar recounts the emergence of the term in his *Reclaiming Reality*: "I had called my general philosophy of science 'transcendental realism' and my special philosophy of the human sciences 'critical naturalism.' Gradually people started to elide the two and refer to the hybrid as 'critical realism.'"[157]

His philosophy of science, namely his transcendental realism, was formulated first in his *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975).[158] In this work Bhaskar offered an alternative to the long-dominant positivist view of science.[159] Specifically, he offered transcendental realism in opposition to the empirical realism of positivism. Science "is a process-in-motion" and not the closed system endemic to positivist thought.[160]

In arguing for transcendental realism, Bhaskar argues that while "knowledge is a social product, produced by means of antecedent social products," in the social activity of science, "knowledge comes to be produced, exist and act quite independently of men."[161] Already one can hear the similarity to other forms of critical realism described above. For Bhaskar, the statements or "laws" of science are not statements about experiences; they are, rather, "statements about the way things act in the world . . .

---

[157]Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 190.

[158]Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Leeds: Leeds Books, 1975).

[159]Ibid., 12.

[160]Ibid., 16.

[161]Ibid., 16-17. He argues that science is "a social activity whose aim is the production of the knowledge of the kinds and ways of acting of independently existing and active things" (ibid., 24).

and would act in a world without men, where there would be no experiences and few, if any, constant conjunctions of events."[162] Humans produce knowledge, not the *objects* of knowledge:

> Any adequate philosophy of science must find a way of grappling with this central paradox of science: that men in their social activity produce knowledge which is a social product much like any other, which is no more independent of its production and the men who produced it than motor cars, armchairs, or books, which has its own craftsmen, technicians, publicists, standards and skills and which is no less subject to change than any other commodity. This is one side of "knowledge." The other is that knowledge is "*of* " things which are not produced by men at all: the specific gravity of mercury, the process of electrolysis, the mechanism of light propagation. None of these "objects of knowledge" depend upon human activity. If men ceased to exist sound would continue to travel and heavy bodies to fall to the earth in exactly the same way, though *ex hypothesi* there would be no-one to know it.[163]

According to Bhaskar, an adequate philosophy of science must be able to account for "both (1) the social character of science and (2) the independence from science of the objects of scientific thought."[164] Neither transcendental idealism nor classical empiricism can sustain such. While transcendental idealism is an improvement over classical empiricism—it at least recognizes the social dimension of scientific knowledge—it does not recognize that the social activity of science *requires* a transcendental stance towards the objects of scientific knowledge. The idea that the "structures and constitutions and causal laws discovered in nature do not depend upon thought" is not a "dogmatic metaphysical belief;"[165] rather, the very activity of science entails the mind-independent character of the objects of science. This entailment is a key

---

[162]Ibid., 17.

[163]Ibid., 21.

[164]Ibid., 24.

[165]Ibid., 27.

part of Bhaskar's theory (and it becomes an important part of McGrath's argument as well). To say that the very activity of science entails a realist understanding of the objects of science is to say that the process of science that has extended, and continues to extend (and correct), our knowledge of the world cannot be explained on any other terms. Transcendental idealist or classical empiricist explanations will not do.

At the most fundamental level, the ontology of classical empiricism and transcendental idealism accounts for their incapacity to move to the real, mind-independent objects of science.[166] For later Bhaskarian critical realists, the postitivist problem is clearly ontological. For example, López and Potter write, "From a realist perspective the philosophy of science is wrong to begin with epistemology. The questions concerning what we can know depend upon what there is in fact there possibly to be known; that it, epistemological questions are dependent upon ontological answers to questions about the nature of existence."[167] Bhaskar contends that if there is anything the history of science teaches, it teaches that "at any moment of time there are types of events never imagined, of which theoretical, and sometimes empirical, knowledge is eventually achieved."[168] It is evident that while scientists can control their tests of certain scientific hypotheses, something is there, something that the tests are seeking to discover that is not and cannot be controlled by perception. Arguing for the second component of his "transcendental realism," Bhaskar writes, "I can quite easily affect any sequence of

---

[166]Ibid., 27-28. Transcendental idealism "tacitly takes over the empiricist account of being" (ibid., 28).

[167]José López and Garry Potter, *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* (London: Athlone, 2001), 10.

[168]Bhaskar, *Realist Theory of Science*, 32.

events to test say Coulomb's or Guy-Lussac's law; but I have no more power over the

relationships the laws describe than the men who discovered them had."[169] Realism is

demanded by the fact that such laws cannot be mentally manipulated; they function

whether or not any human mind acknowledges them.

Those familiar with the transcendental idealism of Immanuel Kant[170] will hear

in the term "transcendental realism" Bhaskar's point of departure with idealism. As

Bhaskar scholar Andrew Collier suggests, Bhaskar's work can be seen as "a realist

inversion of Kant's philosophy."[171] Kant's transcendental idealism sees the natural world

as a construction of the human mind or of a particular community, especially the

scientific community.[172] Nevertheless, only transcendental realism can sustain the

particular idea that is necessary to an understanding of science: "the idea of a law-

governed world independent of man."[173] This attention to ontology, to the nature of the

world, is a crucial part of Bhaskar's work.

> While Kant's arguments lead to a theory about the power of the mind to impose
> structure on the world, Bhaskar's lead to conclusions not only about our mind or
> about ourselves, but also about what the world must be like. Bhaskar's philosophy
> can therefore dispense with the unknowable "noumena" or things-in-themselves
> which haunt Kant's philosophy. However, it does not dispense with them in the
> same way as Kant's idealist successors did—by denying that there is a world
> independent of the knowledge minds may have of it. The nature of the *work* we

---

[169]Ibid., 35.

[170]An introduction to which may be found in Sebastian Gardner, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kant and the "Critique of Pure Reason"* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 269-305.

[171]Collier, *Critical Realism*, xi. This is true of Bhaskar's work, Collier adds, provided "one takes account of the structural transformation which such an inversion must involve" (ibid.).

[172]Bhaskar, *Realist Theory of Science,* 25.

[173]Ibid., 26.

must do in order to find out about the world shows us both that the world is not transparent to us but needs to be discovered, and that it can be made to yield up its secrets.[174]

Skepticism over ontological questions in science has attempted to eradicate such questions, but they are inevitable. Furthermore, no philosopher of science is neutral when it comes to questions of ontology, not even those who eschew ontological questions. Whether implicitly or explicitly, philosophers of science answer "the question of what the world must be like for science to be possible."[175] Bhaskar's claim that intelligible experimental activity presupposes mind-independent objects of science is argued largely along intuitive lines: It seems intuitive that if science advances and corrects previous understandings, there must be something that is real and firm apart from human perception or analysis. This intuition has been challenged, however, in recent philosophy of science. Since McGrath relies heavily on these and similar intuitions, an analysis of their strength will have to be addressed in chapter 4, which offers critical evaluation of McGrath's critical realist methodology.

Bhaskar explains the connection between ontological assumptions and scientific investigation: "It is not necessary that science occurs. But given that it does, it is necessary that the world is a certain way. Thus, the transcendental realist asserts, that [the view that] the world is structured and differentiated can be established by philosophical argument; though the particular structures it contains and the ways in which

---

[174]Collier, *Critical Realism*, 22.

[175]Bhaskar, *Realist Theory of Science*, 29. "Thus suppose a philosopher holds, as both empiricists and transcendental idealists do, that a constant conjunction of events apprehended in sense-experience is at least a necessary condition for the ascription of a causal law and that it is an essential part of the job of science to discover them. Such a

it is differentiated are matters for substantive scientific investigation."[176] As later

adherents state it:

> Realist ontology generates an account of science which socially situates it but where human interests are not opposed to objectivity. Objectivity is to be striven for but this does not mean denying the particularities of the perspective from which our attempts as such are made. Realist ontology certainly gives a strong place in science for empirical observation but also insists that the truth of things-in-themselves does not necessarily (or even usually) lie upon the surface. It focuses upon underlying structures.[177]

Closely connected to Bhaskar's argument about ontology is his poignant

criticism of the epistemic fallacy. This is a much discussed element of his philosophy,

one which McGrath finds crucial to the task of relating the fields of natural science and

theology. The "hallmark of the epistemic fallacy" is the "failure to differentiate

ontological from epistemological considerations."[178] In committing the epistemic fallacy,

one wrongly draws conclusions about the being of an object from what might be said in

regards to knowledge of an object. The logical positivists were guilty of the epistemic

fallacy when they argued for the principle of verifiability, the principle that empirically

unverifiable statements are meaningless statements.[179] In short, the error of the

positivists and later thinkers who commit the epistemic fallacy is to confuse the order of

existence and knowledge. Bhaskar claims that "Knowledge follows existence, in logic

---

philosopher is then committed to the belief that, given that science occurs, there are such conjunctions" (ibid.).

[176]Ibid.

[177]López and Potter, *After Postmodernism*, 12.

[178]Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (London: Verso, 1993), 138.

[179]Bhaskar, *Realist Theory*, 37.

and in time; and any philosophical position which explicitly or implicitly denies this has

got things upside down."[180]

Another related issue that is prominent in Bhaskar's work is the notion that

reality is stratified or multi-layered. McGrath points to this element in Bhaskar's

philosophy as "one of his most distinctive contributions to the development of critical

realism."[181] The differences in methodology between physics, chemistry, biology, and

sociology are explained by the fact that each of these represents a different layer of one

reality. While it is true that chemistry is based on (i.e., emerges from) physics, chemistry

cannot be limited or reduced to physics. Since one discipline emerges from another, this

prevents one from settling on any particular, all-encompassing method of investigating

reality; indeed, there is no single method that can adequately study all layers of reality.

Bhaskar thus argues for a stratified reality in terms of the intelligibility of science's

experimental activity.[182] The fact that science is divided into a number of disciplines,

each with its own distinct methodology, can *only* be understood in terms of the stratified

nature of reality. Bhaskar argues,

> Now for the transcendental realist the stratification this form of explanation imposes
> upon our knowledge reflects a real stratification in the world. Without the concept
> of real strata apart from our knowledge of strata we could not make sense of what
> the scientist, striving to move from knowledge of one stratum to knowledge of the
> next, is trying to do: viz. to discover the reasons why the individuals which he has
> identified (at a particular level of reality) and whose behaviour he has described
> tend to behave the way they do. Without this concept the stratification of science
> must appear as a kind of historical accident, lacking any internal rationale in the

---

[180]Ibid., 39.

[181]McGrath, *Reality*, 219.

[182]Bhaskar, *Realist Theory*, 29.

practice of science (if indeed it is not denied altogether in a reductionist and ultimately phenomenalist account of science).[183]

With the recent heightening of interest in the work of Bhaskar, the application of his critical realism has been extended to a number of academic interests. Routledge is now publishing two series of works related to Bhaskarian critical realism: *Critical Realism: Interventions* and *Routledge Studies in Critical Realism*. The *Interventions* series includes works on critical realism's relation to topics such as quantum theory, Marxism, racism, and economics.[184] The other series now has twelve volumes that address topics including anti-foundationalism and sociological research, Christian belief, and the possibility of knowledge.[185] The standard introduction to critical realism is in the *Interventions* series, which includes a number of readings that follow several large sections from Bhaskar's corpus.[186]

Many critical realists of the Bhaskarian tradition accept critical realism as a way past the failings of postmodernism. Writing in 2001, Potter and López contend that postmodernism is "inadequate as an intellectual response to the times we live in," and they uphold critical realism as "a more reasonable and useful framework from which to

---

[183]Ibid., 171.

[184]A few examples from this growing series will be listed here. Heikki Patomäki, *After International Relations: Critical Realism and the (Re)Construction of World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2002). Andrew Brown, Steve Fleetwood, and Michael Roberts, eds., *Critical Realism and Marxism* (London: Routledge, 2002). Daniel Chernilo, *A Social Theory of the Nation State: The Political Forms of Methodological Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[185]The series is up to twenty-one books now; a few samples are listed here. Ruth Groff, *Critical Realism, Post-Positivism, and the Possibility of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2004). Sean Creaven, *Marxism and Realism: A Materialistic Application of Realism in the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2000).

engage the philosophical, scientific, and social scientific challenges of this new century."[187] While rejecting postmodernism overall, they openly accept that "a more widespread recognition of the sociological determinants of knowledge" is one of postmodernism's achievements.[188] This recognition, of course, is a mainstay in critical realist thought.

Critical realism in its current form shares certain claims with postmodernism. The shared tenets of each will become more apparent in the next chapter's delineation of McGrath's critical realism. It should be noted at this point, however, that critical realism is not postmodernism in another form. As it will become clear, McGrath rejects postmodernism as a whole but embraces (cautiously) critical realism. Others, too, have been careful to distinguish contemporary critical realism from postmodernist thought. For example, Potter and López emphasize the differences between critical realists and postmodernists over the issue of clarity. Postmodernism's acceptance of ambiguity allows a diverse group of thinkers to claim this tradition as their own. Some postmodernist writing is described as "rich and seductive, dense almost mystical. A type of writing that, at its worst, demanded little in terms of evidence, and argumentative coherence and consistency. . . . Postmodernist writing celebrates ambiguity and complexity while realism *struggles* for clarity and simplicity."[189] This hope for clarity is one benefit of the critical realist timbre. Unlike postmodernism, it does not serve as an

---

[186]Margeret Archer, et al., eds., *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[187]López and Potter, *After Postmodernism*, 4.

[188]Ibid.

67

"intellectual catch all" that can tolerate, and even praise, "wildly conflicting theory, practices and alleged knowledges."[190] Rather, it serves as a tool that is versatile yet focused so as to foster serious and worthwhile study and opportunity for advancement in the area to which it is applied.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that critical realism can serve a number of divergent projects both within and outside the field of theology. Various theologians apply critical realism within contexts that support very different visions of God. Barbour works within a process model, Peacocke holds to a personal pantheism, and Polkinghorne operates with a more traditional understanding of the God of revelation.[191] Biblical scholars, most notably N.T. Wright and Ben Meyer, have applied critical realism to issues of interpretation and to argue for authorial intent.   Within the field of evangelical theology and hermeneutics, the critical realist theme of preunderstanding has had a longstanding role, although not always spoken of under the nomenclature of critical realism. Bhaskar applies critical realism mostly in the field of philosophy of science, both natural and social.

One can interpret these differences among those who accept the label "critical realist" in a number of ways. Paul Allen calls for a clearer definition of critical realism. He argues that "it is insufficient to settle for the belief that realism is the best position

[189]Ibid.

[190]Ibid., 5.

[191]Allen, *Ernan McMullin and Critical Realism*, 49.

arising from the philosophy of science in a religious interpretation of reality. What is needed is an investigation into the question 'What is critical realism.'"[192] This matter may be interpreted in another way, however. When it comes to the foundational assumptions of critical realists, it seems that each of the above views do share an almost standard definition of critical realism, which includes the following elements: (1) reality is mind-independent; (2) reality may be known, albeit imperfectly; and (3) reality itself determines how it must be known. Critical realists do share a few common assumptions and a general definition, yet they draw different conclusions in their applications of critical realism. Granted, this diversity does raise a question concerning how far critical realism may take one towards knowledge. If people using critical realism draw such different conclusions about reality, how valuable or helpful can it be? This challenge will be addressed in the analysis of critical realism in chapter 4. Another task must, however, precede this defense. Part of the thesis of this dissertation is that critical realism is central to McGrath's theological method. Such a thesis will only be demonstrated by looking at McGrath's work, by looking at the major topics that guide his overall project. It is to that inquiry this dissertation now turns.

---

[192]Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

CRITICAL REALISM IN ALISTER E. MCGRATH'S
THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Introduction

The previous chapter argued that historically, critical realism is a versatile method that can be applied to a variety of projects and disciplines. The present chapter will show how critical realism serves Alister McGrath in his formation of a theological methodology which he calls scientific theology. Specific points to be addressed in this chapter include McGrath's prolonged engagement with other theological methodologies (chief among them being postliberalism), the concept of nature, natural theology, and the science-theology dialogue. Chapter 4 will then evaluate both McGrath's argument for critical realism and the specific ways, delineated here in chapter 3, that he applies critical realism.

McGrath's Context

When evangelicals talk about theological method, they are usually talking about one of two things. Sometimes "theological method" refers to the very broad discipline of moving from the collection and exegesis of biblical materials to a contemporary expression of those materials and their relevance to contemporary society. This approach is rarely, if ever, laid out as a simple two-step process of collecting biblical materials and then expressing them in contemporary form. Millard Erickson, for

example, places additional steps between biblical studies and contemporary theological expression, steps like conversation with historical theology and interaction with other disciplines.[1]

When others talk about methodology, they are referring to a much more focused set of topics. The primary concern of their work is the philosophical, scientific, and sometimes social issues that arise in the move from biblical studies to contemporary theological expression.[2] For example, the focus of David K. Clark's *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* is largely about the nature and proper definition of theology and how it relates to other fields of study.[3] While Clark includes much about the Bible's role in theology, little is said by way of technical, interpretive advice about what the theologian is to do with the Bible. Clark's work is obviously not meant to be a "method for theology" in that sense. Richard Lints labels his work on method *A Prolegomenon to*

---

[1]Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 70-80. For a recent sampling of four ways evangelicals move from the Bible to theology, see Gary T. Meadows, gen. ed., *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). For another version of the "principled approach" (one of the views in Meadows, *Four Views*) to moving from Scripture to theology and a response from Kevin Vanhoozer, see I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 2004. A more complete picture of Vanhoozer's methodology can be found in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002, and idem, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

[2]This is not to say that these evangelicals deny biblical studies as a starting point, biblical theology as a first step towards interacting with the findings of biblical studies, historical theology as a conversation partner, and contemporary expression as the culmination of this process.

[3]David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003).

Evangelical Theology.[4] This title captures the approach of many contemporary works on

methodology. These works are not meant to cover the methodological specifics of

theologizing so much as they are meant to prepare the way for theology by addressing

certain anti-theological voices.[5]

      Although his work differs significantly, it is the general approach of works like

those of Clark and Lints that Alister McGrath takes in his various works on methodology,

the most expansive being his three-volume methodology titled *A Scientific Theology*. His

is not a work in biblical exegesis, nor is it a description of how to move from biblical

exegesis to contemporary doctrine.[6] McGrath's methodological work is largely a

reflection on the relationship between the natural and social sciences and theology. The

primary burden of *A Scientific Theology* is to explore the relationship between scientific

knowledge and theological knowledge.[7] This relationship hinges on the realist position

---

[4]Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

[5]Similarly, three chapters in a recent work are grouped under the part-three heading, "Theological Method," but these chapters have little to do with method in the first more technical sense and more to do with the issues that Clark and Lints address. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

[6]Such as one sees in Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

[7]McGrath is wary of the view that the relationship between science and theology is a settled issue. Accounts that designate the natures of science and theology as "something fixed, permanent and essential, so that their mutual relationship is determined by something essential to each of the disciplines, unaffected by the vagaries of time, place or culture" are to be rejected. Alister E. McGrath, *Reality*, vol.2 of *A Scientific*

of the natural sciences, the position that there is a mind-independent reality. Of course, objections to this claim abound, and McGrath sets out to defend it. His defense largely depends on the insights of critical realists. For McGrath, critical realism is not a source of theology—that place is reserved for history and preeminently for Scripture—but it does prove quite important for McGrath's approach to Scripture and history. While his work is not solely about critical realism's role in theological method, it does penetrate into the whole of his methodological work. From his discussion of nature as a socially constructed notion to his musings on theory,[8] critical realist assumptions are a constant presence.

Prior to *A Scientific Theology,* McGrath put his methodological concerns on display in a work edited by John Stackhouse, Jr.[9] Noting the conclusions of Richard Lints, he contends that theological methodology, particularly in the evangelical context, has received insufficient attention.[10] The concern underlying this observation is partly assuaged, however, by the fact that careful methodology may be present even when the theologian has not explicitly worked out such a methodology:

A poet may compose with an intuitive understanding of her art, just as an artist may

---

Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 65. In sum, science and religion are not "locked permanently in battle, nor in a tender embrace" (ibid., 70).

[8]The term "theory," when McGrath uses it in the realm of theology, refers to doctrine.

[9]Alister McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method: The State of the Art," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 15-37.

[10]Ibid., 15-16.

be able to create works of brilliance without being able to set out precisely the method that was followed in their conception and production. We must allow for the fact that many evangelicals have grown up in an intellectual environment that shapes their thinking on how theology is done and have often absorbed this without feeling the need to give it formal expression in something as rigorous as 'theological method.'[11]

Even though he makes this concession, it is obvious from his writings that McGrath thinks much work remains to be done with regard to evangelical methodology. His several essays on this matter, and the three-volume *Scientific Theology*, serve to illustrate this point. Clearly, much remains to be worked out in evangelical methodology, particularly with regard to the natural sciences and postmodernist challenges, and McGrath has made great strides within this area in the last decade.

McGrath is more encouraged than discouraged when he looks at the current status of evangelical theology. He disagrees with David Wells' conclusion that evangelicals have lost their interest in theology.[12] It is not theology per se that evangelicals are averting; rather, it is "a pastorally, apologetically, and spiritually irrelevant theology" from which evangelicals are turning.[13] "Most evangelicals feel that systematic theology has come to be about little more than head knowledge and lacks wisdom—a wisdom that can be supplied by those who live out the Christian life in churches and in the world rather than in the splendor of the seminaries."[14] McGrath links

---

[11]Ibid., 16.

[12]Ibid., 16-20.

[13]Ibid., 19.

[14]Ibid.

the problem specifically to those who are, in Packer's words, "entrenched intellectualists," those "rigid, argumentative, critical Christians, champions for God's truth for whom orthodoxy is all."[15] McGrath says he stands within Packer's "essentially Puritan" view of the relationship between Christian knowledge and Christian living: knowledge of God is a "relational reality," not merely an academic exercise.[16]

In discussing McGrath's methodology, it will be helpful to note that he does theology as an evangelical *and* from within the Anglican tradition.[17] It is clear throughout his numerous writings that these two perspectives influence the questions he addresses and the method by which he addresses them. McGrath is glad to see a growing evangelicalism in Anglican ranks. He observes that in 1993 an estimated fifty-five percent of students training for Anglican ministry were evangelical and that the two traditions can certainly learn important lessons from one another: "If Anglicanism needs evangelicalism's dynamism and vitality, evangelicalism needs Anglicanism's generosity

---

[15]J. I. Packer, "An Introduction to Systematic Spirituality," *Crux* 36 (1990): 2-8, quoted in McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method." 19.

[16]McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method," 23. McGrath approvingly quotes Packer who writes: "Knowing God is a matter of *personal involvement*, in mind will and feeling. . . . We must not lose sight of the fact that knowing God is an emotional relationship, as well as an intellectual and volitional one, and could not be a deep relationship between persons were it not so. The believer is and must be emotionally involved in the victories and vicissitudes of God's cause in the world." J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975), 38-39, quoted in McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method," 23.

[17]For McGrath's perspective on the current state of Anglicanism, see Alister E. McGrath, *The Renewal of Anglicanism* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1993).

and tolerance."[18] The latter statement reflects McGrath's dissatisfaction with evangelicalism's dogmatism on non-basic issues.[19] Anglicanism offers "a context in which agreement on essentials can exist alongside a debate over their interpretation and application, as well as allowing other marginal issues to remain creatively unresolved."[20]

McGrath is aware that the questions raised from within his evangelical Anglicanism are by no means the only questions that theology needs to address. Other ecclesial traditions and the history of doctrinal theology reveal the breadth of theology's task. Awareness of the scope of Christian reality is one of the chief insights of his critical realism; intellectual frameworks (worldviews), by their very nature, lead those within them only to a certain set of questions and issues, and so McGrath is careful to point out the vital role that church history and even non-theological disciplines can play in the task of theology, namely, calling to the theologian's attention to latent assumptions that tend to be covered over by his or her particular framework.

McGrath on the Nature of the Theological Task

McGrath suggests that theology must be worked out at a number of different levels. At the broadest level, the doctrines of the Christian faith are each a complex unity. The task of the theologian is, in part, to examine the various components of a doctrine and show how each contributes to the whole. McGrath's realism is evident

---

[18]McGrath, *Renewal of Anglicanism*, 26.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid., 27.

76

when he writes, "Theology does not invent these components; it merely uncovers them. They are not the product of some overactive imagination; they are already present awaiting our analysis."[21] This point demonstrates the relationship that McGrath sees between theology and Scripture. Scripture is already there for the theologian, a product of prior revelatory events, namely, God's acts in history.[22]

The task of theology may be described as "'taking rational trouble over a mystery'—recognizing that there may be limits to what can be achieved, but believing that this intellectual grappling is both worthwhile and necessary."[23] Critical realist claims about the limits of rationality are obvious in this definition. Specifically, McGrath believes that even though theology is responsible to an objective reality, God himself is the object of such a critical realist theology and there are significant limitations human observers face when approaching and describing God. The fact that theology faces such limitations is no reason, however, to abandon the task or to give up on the quest for knowledge of God and truth. "It just means being confronted with something so great that we cannot fully comprehend it, and so we must do the best that we can with the analytical and descriptive tools at our disposal."[24]

Theologians in every century have done theology in this way, utilizing the

---

[21]McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method," 25.

[22]Alister E. McGrath, *Theory*, vol. 3 of *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 146.

[23]Alister E. McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 158.

[24]Ibid.

tools of their day and sometimes creating new ones. This is not to say that good theology

has been done in a novel way or that it is individualistic; rather, it has always been a

product of the church, having its source in the living communion of the saints. "It is not

theology that brings a church into being. Theology is what erupts from a self-confident

and reflective community of faith, in possession of a vision of why it exists and what it

proposes to do. It is the expression, not the cause, of that vision."[25]

In placing doctrine as a response to reality rather than the cause of it, McGrath

likens the doctrines that arise from the church to theories that arise in the scientific

enterprise.[26] "Theories are determined and controlled by the external reality to which

they are a response. Yet theories are not passive responses to reality; they are constructed

by human minds, and therefore bear at least something of a socially located imprint. We

must therefore give thought to the process by which theories are generated, developed

and received within the scientific and theological communities from a critical realist

perspective."[27] Because theological theories are a response to reality, they cannot be

placed into the realm of opinion while the natural, applied, social, and formal sciences are

said to produce knowledge.[28] Such categorization is the product of a problematic

---

[25]McGrath, *Renewal of Anglicanism*, 3-4.

[26]He writes, "The theological counterpart of scientific theories are, of course, Christian doctrines." McGrath, *Theory*, xv.

[27]Ibid., xiv.

[28]In contemporary usage, "science" is typically used to refer to the pursuit of knowledge about the natural universe and all that is in it, a knowledge that can be verified and agreed upon by other human beings working in the same conditions. These pursuits of natural knowledge are often broken down into at least four categories: The first

naturalism that limits knowledge claims to a select group of sciences. Theology, like these other sciences, is a response to reality, so while theology arises from the church, its voice cannot be limited to the church. In other words, McGrath is concerned to preserve Christianity's *transtraditional* relevance. The Christian faith is not just a communally relevant tradition; it is relevant across traditions, meaning the church does theology not just for itself but for a world without God. More particularly, the church's theology serves a world that is bent on self deception. In the words of Stanley Hauerwas, whom McGrath approvingly quotes, "the church serves the world by giving the world the means to see itself truthfully."[29]

This belief in the transtraditional relevance of theology is evident in McGrath's view of evangelism. A few within Anglicanism have opposed evangelism on the grounds that it is imperialism, but McGrath takes another view of the Christian mission: "Evangelism is not based on an imperialist craving to dominate the world, but on a longing to *share* the good news of God with a world that sorely needs hope and forgiveness. It is something that springs from the deepest feelings of love and a heartfelt

---

category reflects the most popular usage of the term which refers to *natural sciences* (i.e., biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, and geology). Secondly, fields like engineering and medical science are rooted in the natural sciences but they are often called applied sciences. Thirdly, the term "science" is also used in reference to social sciences, including disciplines like law, linguistics, history, anthropology, comparative religion, political science, etc. Finally, the term is used to refer to the formal sciences of mathematics and logic.

[29]Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*: *A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 101-02, quoted in Alister McGrath, *The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 224.

desire to share something that it would be selfish and irresponsible to keep to oneself."[30]

This same responsibility extends to the entirety of Christianity's deep reservoir of truth. McGrath thus seeks a theological method that allows one to speak from *within* Christianity but in such a way that the voice of Christianity extends *beyond* the Christian community into public discourse. A public scientific theology is "able to stand its own ground, while engaging in dialogue with others."[31] This theology, governed as it is by critical realist arguments about the nature of human knowledge, is mainly an attempt to be true to reality, while at the same time understanding that theology will never describe reality comprehensively or perfectly.

McGrath on Other Theological Methodologies

It is this concern to be accountable to reality and to do so in a public, chastened way that leads McGrath away from other methodologies. Specifically, he rejects the basic programs of fundamentalism, liberalism, and postliberalism, and he

---

[30]McGrath, *Renewal of Anglicanism*, 22-23. Emphasis his. How this view is to be reconciled with other statements from McGrath is beyond the scope of this paper. For an example of these other statements, see Alister McGrath, "A Particularist View," in *Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 151-86. One particular point of interest comes in this article where McGrath writes, "We are assured that those who respond in faith to the explicit preaching of the gospel will be saved. We cannot draw the conclusion from this, however, that *only* those who thus respond will be saved. God's revelation is not limited to the explicit human preaching of the good news, but extends beyond it. . . . A human failure to evangelize cannot be transposed into God's failure to save" (ibid., 178). Emphasis his.

[31]Alister E. McGrath, *The Science of God: An Introduction to Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 13.

ultimately arrives at a fourth evangelical and critical realist method that he couches in broader terms as "scientific theology."

Fundamentalism

McGrath understands fundamentalism, in accord with traditional interpretations, as an early twentieth-century movement in the United States which reacted to the cultural tides that raged during those years.[32] It was not necessarily a system of doctrine that distinguished the movement—though certain fundamental beliefs and a tendency towards dispensationalism did mark the movement as a whole—but rather a particular approach to the prevailing culture. That approach was withdrawal: "A siege mentality became characteristic of the movement; fundamentalist counter communities viewed themselves as walled cities, or (to evoke the pioneer spirit) circles of wagons, defending their distinctive beliefs against the prevailing culture."[33] This defense was largely irrelevant to the wider public, however.

Although McGrath does not make this connection explicitly, it later becomes clear that the anti-intellectual nature of early fundamentalism typifies the naïve realism criticized by critical realists. Fundamentalism often displayed a "black and white" naïveté that left no room for the complexities of Scripture and religious belief. This naïve realism is what McGrath takes exception to, not specific fundamentals or beliefs. Fundamentalists did care about reality. They did care about orthodox Christianity and

[32]McGrath, *Renewal of Anglicanism*, 90.

[33]Ibid., 91.

McGrath affirms many of their fundamental beliefs. "Yet," he says, "it will be obvious that a concern for *fundamentals* does not make one a 'fundamentalist.'"[34] McGrath is after a biblical, doctrinal, realistic Christianity that engages the culture rather than retreating from it, and it is a critical relist disposition that he believes leads him past certain naiveties at the heart of the fundamentalist project.

Liberalism

If fundamentalism's naïveté and withdrawal from culture were problematic, liberalism's accommodation to culture was devastating. Liberals lost the essence of Christianity and the real Jesus of Nazareth. McGrath quotes George Tyrrell (referencing Adolf von Harnack) to this effect: "The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of catholic darkness, is only a reflection of a liberal protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well."[35] When Christianity is shaped by transient cultural phenomena rather than the revelation of God, it becomes irrelevant as quickly as those cultural trends shift. McGrath thus faults the radical, liberal theologies of the 1960s for being part of a movement "fashioned generally with minimal or highly selective reference to the Christian tradition, that provided *post hoc* rationalizations of attitudes and ideas, whose ultimate origin lay firmly in the social milieu."[36] The liberals made

---

[34]Ibid., 94. His emphasis.

[35]George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (London: Black, 1963), 49, quoted in McGrath, *Renewal*, 98. Tyrrell's *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* was originally published in 1909.

[36]McGrath, *Renewal of Anglicanism*, 104.

theological decisions in reaction to contemporary trends; then, those decisions were subsequently Christianized, described in terms drawn from the Christian tradition.

As a realist and one who argues that Christianity has its own universal content that must be brought to bear on the prevailing culture, rather than the other way around, McGrath finds the radical liberal program to be an unsatisfactory theological trajectory. Christian vocabulary applied to secular agendas does not make those agendas Christian. Granted, theology is to be culturally engaged and culturally relevant, but it must take on these proportions, not through acclimation to culture, but through engagement with it. A critical realist methodology allows one to do this while staying true to the divine reality. This is where liberalism failed. Desperate to fit Christianity to the modern context, it lost sight of its responsibility to the way things really are.

Postliberalism

McGrath's critical realism comes to the fore as he addresses another methodology. This third alternative is postliberalism, a fairly recent movement in America's theological milieu. It has ties to the schools of divinity at Yale and Duke, finding the clearest expression of its distinctive method in the work of George Lindbeck.[37]

---

[37]George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

Lindbeck lays out what he takes to be the main theories of doctrine and offers his own cultural-linguistic approach as an alternative. First, Lindbeck rejects the "cognitive-propositionalist," approach that takes religious doctrines to be defensible statements about reality. Concerns over the correspondence theory of truth and the possibility of objective, universal knowledge lead him to reject this cognitive approach.[38] Secondly, Lindbeck rejects the "experiential-expressivist" approach of liberalism.[39] This once dominate approach has its roots in Schleiermacher's grounding of religion in unmediated experience. Schleiermacher held that religious experience is primary and doctrines, symbols, and myths, are only "secondary expressions of this foundational inward state."[40] For Lindbeck, this approach is flawed because the plurality and diversity of religion argues against any sort of universal religious experience. The liberal model does not take into account religious diversity or the "historical, mediated character of all experience."[41]

As an alternative to the cognitive-propositionalist and the experiential-expressivist approaches, Lindbeck offers a "cultural-linguistic" interpretation of religion. In this scheme, human experience is only possible through culture and linguistic resources. People are shaped by their historical and cultural contexts, living "in and

---

[38]Sheila Greeve Davaney and Delwin Brown, "Postliberalsm," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 454.

[39]Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 31-32.

[40]Davaney and Brown, "Postliberalism," 454.

[41]Ibid.

through overarching interpretive schemas that . . . organize experience and establish individual identity in the context of particular communities."[42] In light of this view of human experience, "Lindbeck concludes that to be religious is . . . to internalize and live through a specific tradition and its . . . portrayal of life."[43] To become religious one learns the interpretive story of a particular tradition and then learns to practice that tradition's way of life.[44] In his view, theological/doctrinal statements are neither true nor false; they are particular rules adopted by a particular community and that have an organizational role in the life of that community. It is at this point that McGrath develops his critique against Lindbeck.

McGrath's critique of Lindbeck and the postliberal program was set out at length at Oxford University in his 1990 Bampton Lectures.[45] McGrath contends that Lindbeck's criticisms of the cognitive-propositionalist approach are aimed at a caricature, arguing that Lindbeck assumes a rigid cognitive propositionalism that makes definitive and exhaustive statements about God and which is naïve about the cultural aspects of doctrine. Lindbeck's formulation is not, however, a cognitive propositionalism that McGrath recognizes. "It fails to register the historical and linguistic sophistication of cognitive approaches to doctrine. For example, Lindbeck's suggestion that the 'cognitive

---

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Published as Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study of the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 14-80.

propositional' approach to doctrine treats any given doctrine as 'eternally true' fails to take account of the evident ability of proponents of this approach to reformulate, amplify or supplement a doctrine with changing historical circumstances."[46] McGrath continues to argue this case in his usual historical fashion, giving examples in history of those who could be classified under the cognitive-propositionalist heading, but who nevertheless clearly hold that doctrines are "reliable, yet incomplete, descriptions of *reality*. Their power lies in what they represent rather than in themselves."[47]

Here we see a critical realist implication: doctrine is partly to be measured by its relation to reality. Lindbeck complains about the obvious tie of cognitive-propositionalist approaches to correspondence theories of truth, but it seems something like this is necessary for a theology that is relevant.   McGrath is not taking the naïve position that says words completely map out reality. While words are not experience and they cannot mirror the fullness of experience or of God, they are what the theologian has been given to work with. "Given that they [words] cannot hope to represent it [reality] in its totality, and given the inevitable limitations attending any attempt to express in words something which ultimately lies beyond them," McGrath recognizes that different sets of words represent reality with lesser and greater degrees of reliability.[48] No ultimate set of words exhaustively describes the object of theology. Nevertheless, "If an experience is to be articulated in words, in order to communicate or to attempt a communal envisioning of

---

[46]Ibid.,16.

[47]Ibid., 17. Emphasis added.

[48]Ibid.

this experience, some form of a 'cognitive-propositionalist' dimension is inevitable. Yet this is not to reduce experience to words but simply to attempt to convey it through words."[49]

Critical realist arguments and theological concerns ultimately lead McGrath forward and through postliberalism on to his own methodology. Specifically, it was Lindbeck's "manifest failure" with regard to the "propriety and intellectual viability" of cognitive-propositionalist approaches to doctrine that led McGrath to develop his scientific theology.[50] "Lindbeck insists that doctrines regulate the language of a religious community, yet seems markedly reluctant to allow that they have anything much to do with God, or even with reality in general. This is perhaps one of the most baffling aspects of Lindbeck's approach to doctrine, which has led many to conclude that he is anti-realist in outlook."[51] In Lindbeck's program, theology ends up being "talk about talk about God" rather than "talk about God."[52] For McGrath, however, an authentic Christianity must go beyond talk about talk. "Intra-systematic consistency may be a necessary condition of Christian authenticity; it is most emphatically not a sufficient condition."[53] McGrath contends Lindbeck's method calls into question "epistemological realism and a correspondence theory of truth, apparently on the basis of the belief that

---

[49]Ibid.

[50]McGrath, *Reality*, 41-42.

[51]Ibid., 47-48.

[52]Ibid., 49.

[53]Ibid., 50.

these have been discredited by philosophical discourse."[54] For McGrath, Lindbeck's approach is too hasty and he therefore dedicates much of his second volume, *Reality*, to showing the viability of a trans-traditional Christian voice. Critical realism plays a significant role in this effort. If there is no mind-independent reality but only communally-constructed realit*ies*, Christian theology will not be able to transcend its particular community. So, for example, the truth of Christianity would not be able to speak with authority to the scientific community or the Buddhist community. This is quite problematic and yet it seems that it is these antirealist assumptions that drive, at least in part, the entire postliberal worldview.

For McGrath, neither fundamentalism, liberalism, nor post-liberalism offers an accurate theological method. In eliminating each of these methods, he is left with a critical realist alternative. Fundamentalism did not take the complexity of reality (and the complexity of discovering and communicating that reality) seriously. Liberalism did not take the uniqueness of the Christian reality seriously. Postliberalism undermined the degree to which Christianity gives a description of a single reality. Yet, a methodology guided by critical realism affords theologians the opportunity to bypass the shortcomings of these three methodologies.

McGrath's Preferred Critical Realist Methodology

The critical realist methodology that McGrath adopts in lieu of his rejection of liberalism, fundamentalism, and postliberalism may best be described with reference to

---

[54]Ibid., 52.

his views on divine revelation, tradition, the science-theology dialogue, and nature and natural theology. In what follows McGrath's formulations on these topics, as well as the critical realist import on these formulations, will be delineated.

Divine Revelation

McGrath's category of divine revelation embraces much more than God's revelational acts in history and the biblical texts that describe and interpret these acts. God's acts in history are the initial revelation, which McGrath (following Barth) compares to an explosion, and the deposit of faith resulting from this explosion is thereby analogous to a stratified crater, a deposit that McGrath argues is created directly by the initial revelatory acts and comprised of at least eight layers:[55]

> On a critical realist development of Christianity, a number of different levels of social construction may be identified within the complex aggregate of texts, ideas, images, values, communities and events, which may be described as 'revelation' in the developed sense of the term, which were brought into existence, or given a new depth of meaning, as a result of the original revelatory events which lie behind them, and which are handed on and transmitted through history. These are all affirmed to be integral yet distinct aspects of the same fundamental notion, whose interconnectedness may be explored and confirmed by historical and theological analysis.[56]

Here McGrath applies the critical realist notion that all of reality is stratified to the theological concept of revelation. Later in this chapter the claim that reality is stratified (multilayered) will be discussed as it appears in McGrath's approach to the science theology dialogue. It is in this context of the science and theology dialogue that he

---

[55]Ibid., 153.

[56]Ibid., 146.

defends and initially explains the concept. For present purposes, however, it is sufficient to notice that McGrath sees revelation as having a multilayered, "extended meaning, which embraces the original revelational acts and the witness to those acts in Scripture and in the proclamation of the church."[57] McGrath says it is inappropriate to talk about different aspects of the sacred deposit (i.e., revelation), because this would suggest "a single-leveled reality which is merely viewed from different angles or perspectives."[58] Rather, "What we are dealing with is actually a *stratified reality*, possessing a number of interrelating layers."[59] The totality of the respective layers constitutes revelation, and revelation is much more than any single layer.[60] Hence, revelation is more than the historical acts of God, more than religious experience, and more than Scripture. Altogether, McGrath lists eight layers of revelation while suggesting that the list could be much larger.

Listed first among the layers of revelation are the biblical texts, "which are understood both to mediate the events which constitute revelation, and to set the context for the events of revelation, providing a means by which certain events are to be interpreted."[61] The canonical Scriptures bear witness to God's revelatory acts in history

---

[57]Ibid., 145. McGrath is clearly adopting a form of Barth's threefold form of the Word of God.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid.

[60]Ibid., 146.

[61]Ibid.

and they offer "narrated interpretations of their significance."[62] God's revealatory acts

have had an impact upon history, and Scripture is one of those effects.[63]

It should be remembered that while these statements seem to place Scripture

one step away from the more foundational "events of revelation," McGrath does affirm

the Christian cannon itself as revelation. He believes that Scripture is the "supreme norm

of evangelical thought,"[64] and affirms the inerrancy of Scripture.[65] As such, Scripture

plays the magisterial and foundational role in theology: "Theology must be nourished and

governed at all points by Holy Scripture."[66] Theology is a developing body of

knowledge that is itself always subject to revision. Some may feel very uncomfortable

with the idea that their theology is subject to revision, but while this discomfort may be

"natural," it is anti-Scripture. This is to say, when one holds so tightly to one's

---

[62]Ibid.

[63]Ibid., 153.

[64]McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method," 32.

[65]Ibid., 31. In a recent interview McGrath said, "I know the Chicago Statement very well and I actually don't have any problems with it at all, particularly as expounded by J. I. Packer." For the interview conducted by Page Brooks, see Page Matthew Brooks "A Comparison of Reactions to Postmodernity and its Influence on Theological Method in Works of Alister McGrath and Seyyed Hossein Nasr" (Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 263.

[66]McGrath, *Science of God*, 13. So far in his scientific theology, McGrath has not interacted significantly with the actual text of Scripture, and yet its major themes certainly stand in the background.

theological conclusions, one is in effect undermining Scripture.[67] McGrath predicts "there will always be a scattering of evangelicals who seek to make absolute conformity to the ideas of some favored individual the litmus test of evangelical identity and orthodoxy."[68] Good theology is ultimately "our interpretations of Scripture," but evangelicals are on a "quest for biblical authenticity" and this quest is "corporate."[69] Theology, therefore, never rests, and theologians must never work in isolation from history and the other intellectual disciplines.

While theology is in constant flux, McGrath is careful to say that it must always be rendered in a way that is faithful to Christian Scripture. His evangelical commitments are quite clear in this regard. While he does recognize the "collapse of foundationalism," he seems to be referring to *classical* foundationalism.[70] He clearly does not reject all foundations. For example, he approvingly cites evangelicalism's shared emphasis "on the total reliability and trustworthiness of Scripture as the ultimate *foundation* and criterion of our saving knowledge of God."[71] McGrath is nevertheless concerned that Scripture may in some instances be usurped by theology and that theological frameworks might end up taking pride of place rather than Scripture to which

---

[67]Alister E. McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation in Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 151.

[68]Ibid.

[69]Ibid., 150.

[70]McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method," 34.

[71]Ibid., 29. Emphasis added.

such frameworks owe their existence.

> The task to which evangelical theology must set itself is that of showing it is legitimate and helpful to use theology as a means of enhancing the quality of the believer's engagement with Scripture. This type of strategy can be seen in the preface to John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and in a host of significant works developing similar lines—namely, that at its best, systematic theology is to be viewed as an extended engagement with and commentary on the Bible.[72]

Of course, Scripture must be rendered faithfully, for while Scripture is infallible, interpretations of it are not. McGrath has thus far not developed any detailed procedure for biblical interpretation. Perhaps he is content with other's work in the field or perhaps a critical realist approach to the theological disciplines is forthcoming. Thus far, McGrath is primarily interested in discussing broad methodological implications that critical realism has for interpretation. In this instance, as in so many others, the chastened epistemological position of critical realism guides his thinking: "We all read the Bible through a filter of assumptions, many of which we have failed to identify. One of the relatively few insights of postmodernism with which I find myself in full agreement is that there is no privileged vantage point independent of tradition that allows us to read any text—biblical or otherwise—devoid of prior assumptions and precommitments."[73] While he adopts a postmodern claim here, he objects to the postmodern application of the claim. Critical realism does not allow one to move from the fact of one's situatedness, namely the fact of one's "prior assumptions and

---

[72]Ibid., 20.

[73]McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition," 148.

precommitments," into a textual relativism or antirealism.[74] "This [battle against prior assumptions and precommitments] is not a fatal difficulty—unless, of course, we pretend there is no problem and insist that our unconsciously assumption-laden and theory-driven interpretation of the Bible is neutral, detached, objective, and permanently valid for all peoples and all times."[75] The latter insistence is a hermeneutical naïveté, namely naïve realism.

As an example of this naiveté McGrath, perhaps somewhat hastily, mentions the work of Wayne Grudem.[76] He suggests that Grudem's *Systematic Theology* "tends to imply that all that is required in the theological task is to assemble the biblical passages relevant to a biblical topic. Interpretation takes the shape of reconciling apparently

---

[74]Critical realist Douglas V. Porpora argues that a historically accurate picture of Jesus based on the accounts in the Gospels, a picture that is demanded by reality, is possible from a critical realist position. Douglas V. Porpora, "Judgmental Rationality and Jesus," in *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 49-61.

[75]McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition," 149.

[76]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). McGrath has clearly discerned a potential danger in theological method. It sounds as if what he is attacking is what has commonly been called proof-texting, but whether these charges extend to Wayne Grudem's work in the way McGrath suggests is highly debatable. Grudem studied New Testament at Cambridge and is certainly no stranger to the historical situatedness of that document. Grudem does define systematic theology as "any study that answers the question, 'What does the whole Bible teach us today?' about any given topic" (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 21). Yet a cursory reading of the work reveals that Grudem is well aware of the context of these passages, and that he is able and concerned to discern the cultural from the timeless. The nature of this particular textbook is, as the subtitle puts it, "An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine." Its parameters would, therefore, certainly seem to limit the amount of historical (or philosophical) data within the book and therefore it is too much to assume that Grudem is unaware of the church's historical conversation about these doctrinal matters.

contradictory passages. Biblical passages are treated as timeless and culture-free

statements that can be assembled to yield a timeless and culture-free theology that stands

over and above the shifting sands of our postmodern culture."[77] In his rejection of

Grudem's method, McGrath aligns himself with another thinker who has a certain

appreciation of postmodernism, namely, Kevin Vanhoozer, who "has shown himself to

be aware of the importance of hermeneutics and no mean student of the art."[78]

Surprisingly, McGrath has very little to say about Vanhoozer's work or why it is

important. Presumably, he has affinities for Vanhoozer's work because it treats favorably

critical realist themes such as the impact of preunderstanding on biblical interpretation.[79]

Tradition

For McGrath theology is "fundamentally an attentiveness to Scripture and [it]

encompasses a desire to express and communicate what is found there to the church and

---

[77]McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method," 30. McGrath is not alone in his critique of Grudem's approach. For example, John Morrison contends, regarding Grudem's formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, that "Grudem repeatedly speaks of everything in Scripture as 'proving' this or that about God's triunity. Thus Scriptural recitation, usually without context or interrelatedness to the redemptive-historical action of God for us, is held to be sufficient to establish the doctrine." John D. Morrison, "Trinity and Church: An Examination of Theological Methodology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 449. While Morrison finds himself closer to Grudem's theological conclusions than those of Stanley Grenz, he ultimately prefers the theological method of Grenz, a method marked by "theological unitariness, synthesis, relatedness, and the faithful following of the way God has and will take in creation and redemption." Ibid., 454.

[78]McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method," 30.

[79]For example, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 299-303.

the world."[80] While the root of good theology is Scripture, sound theology never does its work isolated from the thinking of previous theologians and exegetes: "The task of rendering Scripture faithfully is, in my view, best carried out in dialogue with the 'great tradition' of Christian theology and in response to the challenges to the Christian faith which are raised by other disciplines—such as the natural sciences."[81] The "great tradition" to which McGrath refers here is the "nearly two thousand years of engagement with Scripture" that contemporary theology has at its disposal.[82] This body of literature, comprised of centuries of written reflections upon (and applications of) Scripture, serves as a conversation partner to theology, a partner that guards against the kind of naïve theologizing to which one is liable if one is only aware of one's current cultural (and historical) framework. As a critical realist, McGrath argues that all theology is done from within a particular historical moment; thus, the subtle influence of cultural and philosophical assumptions (presuppositions) must be recognized. "Otherwise we will be left with the naïve and potentially damaging view that evangelicals can read Scripture and reflect on it in a detached, objective, and culture-free manner." [83] A theological method guided by critical realism denies the possibility of this kind of reading and reflection.

McGrath is notably careful not to overestimate the voice of tradition; it is not

---

[80]McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition," 140.

[81]McGrath, *Science of God*, 14.

[82]McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition," 140.

[83]Ibid., 149.

authoritative in the sense that Scripture is authoritative. Furthermore, theologians are

under no obligation to hold to certain positions just because someone in the past held

those positions. Even when one's theological forefathers—as the Reformers would be

for most modern-day reformed theologians—hold to a position, one is not necessarily

bound to it. No "family obligation to repeat what their forebears affirmed" falls to

evangelicals.[84] Those historical affirmations must ultimately be judged by Scripture.

Evangelicals "ought to be affirming the inerrancy of *Scripture*" while at the same time

recognizing the human and fallible position of *tradition*.[85] "Parrot-like" repetition of the

past does not ensure orthodoxy.[86] And it certainly does not promote culturally-relevant

theology. The message of the Bible does not change with the tides of culture, but each

culture does have its own problems and questions. A sensitive evangelical theology,

hearing and addressing those concerns, will thus bear significant differences from earlier

theologies, depending on the particular culture in which it is carried out: "The history of

evangelicalism suggests that the success of the movement rests on its willingness to

correlate Scripture with the context in which it finds itself, rather than simply reaching

backward into evangelical history to draw out past correlations, such as the way in which

a text was applied by Calvin in his sixteenth-century Genevan context."[87] In the words of

---

[84]McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method," 31.

[85]Ibid., 31. He writes, "Evangelicalism is principally about being biblical not about the uncritical repetition of past evangelical beliefs" (ibid., 32).

[86]Ibid., 31.

[87]Ibid., 36. McGrath continues: "For instance, it is well know that Calvin was interested in—and, to some extent, influenced by—the language of the classical Roman

David Wells, "Scripture at its *terminus a quo*, needs to be de-contextualized in order to grasp its transcultural content, and it needs to be re-contextualized in order that its content may be meshed with the cognitive assumptions and social patterns of our own time."[88]

The Science-Theology Dialogue

McGrath finds grounds for dialogue between the natural sciences and theology in a number of places. While others may find alternate paths to a robust dialogue,[89] McGrath thinks the dialogue is at its best within a critical realist framework. In this framework, reality is what it is apart from human observation, reality is multilayered, and finally, reality is marked by regularity. These three characteristics will now be delineated.

Shared realist outlook. McGrath contends that the natural sciences and theology, in their proper forms, share the view that reality is what it is independently of human cognition. While some within the scientific community reject realism, they primarily fall within the field of philosophy of science rather than the category of

philosophical and rhetorical tradition. China has an older philosophical and rhetorical tradition. Why should Asian Christians use the same ideas that Calvin borrowed when they have a distinguished heritage of their own from which to draw?" (ibid., 37).

[88]David F. Wells, "The Nature and Function of Theology," in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnson (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 177, quoted in McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method," 36.

[89]See Niels Henrik Gregersen and J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, eds., *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

practical science. Those engaged in the practice of science, however, readily

acknowledge the objective reality to which their methodologies point.

Science is a successful enterprise; it produces observable results. This

predictive success demands the realist viewpoint:

> The remarkable and predictive successes of the natural sciences are widely held to
> point to the independent reality of what it describes. Airplanes fly, and they fly, at
> least in part, on account of the relation between pressure and kinetic energy first set
> out by Daniel Bernoulli in 1738. Television and radio work, at least in part on
> account of the predictions made by Maxwell's theory of electromatic radiation. . . .
> And what more effective explanation may be offered for this success than the
> simple assertion that what scientific theories describe is *really* present?[90]

In the history of science, some have reasoned from this predictive power to a conception

of science as the *sole* path to knowledge, the lone realm of objective truth, and as such,

have overestimated the implications of science's predictive success. At this point

McGrath brings the critical realist notion that reality is stratified to bear on the

relationship between science and theology.

The stratified nature of reality. On a critical realist view, science is

admittedly remarkable and objective, but it is incomplete. McGrath draws on C. S. Lewis

to lead into his discussion of this very point:

> The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if
> we trust to them; it was not *in* them; it only came *through* them, and what came
> through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own
> past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the
> thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For
> they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found,

---

[90]Alister E. McGrath, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*
(Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 140. Emphasis added.

the echo of a time we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.[91] Applying the outlook of this passage to the science-theology dialogue, McGrath writes, "One can study the natural order, and stop at that point—or one can go on, and discern what lies beyond and behind it, realizing that, from a religious perspective, the natural order beckons us onward to discover its creator. Perhaps one of the most significant differences between science and religion thus lies not in how they begin, nor even in how they proceed, but in how they end."[92] Here one of McGrath's chief convictions about the science-religion dialogue can be discerned: even a complete study of the natural order—if that were possible—could not carry human beings to a proper stopping point. The nature of reality is such that no one method or discipline can completely or adequately describe it.

This incompleteness of the natural sciences is a major theme in the work of Roy Bhaskar, whose work plays an important role McGrath's own development.[93] In Bhaskar's critical realism, there is but one stratified (or multilayered) reality, and this stratified nature of reality is a quality of reality itself and not of the human observers of reality. Reality is what it is, namely stratified, apart from observation. To ignore or deny this fact is ultimately reductionistic.[94]

---

[91]C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (London: Collins, 1965): 97-98, quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *Foundations of Dialogue,* 209.

[92]McGrath, *Foundations of Dialogue*, 209.

[93]For McGrath's explanation of how this came about, see McGrath, *Reality*, xv-xvi.

[94]McGrath, *Order of Things*, 100.

Even within the natural sciences this stratification of reality can be discerned. Biology, chemistry, and physics each investigate a particular level of reality, and no one of these disciplines can be reduced to the other. Certainly, these levels are related and some are even rooted in others. Still, while chemistry is rooted in and emerges from physics, chemistry cannot be reduced to physics; the same can be said of biology: "For Bhaskar, biology cannot be 'reduced' to chemistry or physics, precisely because the biological stratum possessed characteristics which go beyond those of the stratum in which it is rooted."[95]

McGrath draws significantly on this concept of stratification for his own theological methodology. Just as there are differences in the methods of the natural and social sciences,[96] theology, in response to its utterly unique object, has its own method. Because God has (or is) a distinctive ontological identity, one cannot expect that God may be investigated with the same methods used in the physical, biological, or social sciences. The very nature of God, as revealed by God, determines how God must be investigated. This is to say, for the scientific theologian, what is known about God governs the very task of theology. Revelation proceeds investigation: "A scientific theology thus conceives itself as an *a posteriori* discipline, responding to and offering an

---

[95]Ibid., 101. In other words, "Bhaskar insists that each stratum—whether physical, biological, or cultural—is to be seen as 'real', and capable of investigation using *means appropriate to its distinctive identity*." McGrath, *Reality*, 217. Emphasis mine.

[96]"No generalized scientific methodology, no *mathesis universalis*, which can be utilized without variance and uncritically, applies to all sciences" (McGrath, *The Order of Things*, 106).

account of what may be known of God through revelation, taking into full account the stratified nature of that knowledge of God."[97]

McGrath applies critical realist epistemology—which says that theology is an *a posteriori* discipline that has a unique methodology, unlike the methods of the natural sciences—to the agnostic claims of Richard Dawkins. Suspicious of everything that is not supported by empirical evidence, Dawkins rejects knowledge that emerges from sources other than the natural sciences. Faith is "blind trust" and has no regard for evidence.[98] McGrath faults Dawkins for arriving at this "ludicrous" definition of faith apart from careful investigation. Who defines faith as "blind trust"? Dawkins bases much of his criticism on this particular notion of faith, a notion which is nothing but a straw man, "despite the fact that no major Christian writer adopts such a definition."[99] He "seems to get carried away with his anti-religious rhetoric by sliding from 'this cannot be proved' to 'this is false' with alarming ease, apparently unaware of the lapses of reasoning along the way."[100]

Dawkins contends that the notion of God is superfluous in light of a Darwinism that can explain the beauty and complexity of life.[101] Not only is God

---

[97]McGrath, *Reality*, xi.

[98]Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th anniversary ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 198.

[99]Alister E. McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 86.

[100]Ibid., 88.

[101]McGrath, *Dawkins' God*, 90.

superfluous, he is highly improbable. Any "God worthy of the name must have been a being of colossal intelligence, a supermind, an entity of extremely low probability—a very improbable being indeed. Even if the postulation of such an entity explained anything (and we don't need it to), it still wouldn't help because it raises a bigger mystery than it solves."[102] McGrath points out the highly presumptuous nature of this claim: "God we are told is 'highly improbable.' Well, *how* improbable? And on what basis is this figure determined? Again, God is an 'entity of extremely low probability.' *How* low? An on the basis of what evidence is this probability determined? Just how does Dawkins arrive at any figure? And since when does probability determine whether or not something actually exists?"[103]

Accordingly, Dawkins grants scientific exploration an inflated role in the acquisition of knowledge. He assumes too much and argues for too little. In particular, he assumes that science has a grasp of and connection to knowledge that other disciplines naturally do not have, but he never adequately demonstrates why science is to be given such a privileged epistemic status. Science merely is *the* path to objective truth. McGrath's responds to this claim with an epistemology that "demands that methodology be specifically linked to ontology."[104] In other words, a key component of critical realist

---

[102]From a 1992 Dawkins lecture, quoted in McGrath, *Dawkins' God*, 90.

[103]McGrath, *Dawkins' God*, 90.

[104]Ibid.

methodology is that reality determines method. Ontology determines epistemology.[105] It is, therefore, incorrect to expect the methods of natural science to parallel theological method at all points. The objects of these two fields of study are not the same; the creator is not the creation. Simply put, the ontological status of God requires a certain method just as surely as the ontological status of the creation requires its own method. This robust form of realism opens the way for a scientific theology that can "consolidate its position as a distinctive and legitimate intellectual discipline. . . . develop its own understanding of its sources and methods . . . [and] clarify its relationship to other disciplines in the natural and social sciences."[106]

Reality's regularity. It is the "fundamental conviction that the world is characterized by regularity and intelligibility" that stands as one of the more obvious parallels between the natural sciences and Christian theology.[107] Natural science assumes a natural order in the world, but it cannot prove it. Indeed, McGrath contends that such order cannot be explained within an entirely naturalistic worldview. This contention cannot be proven in the strictest sense, but what can? The question for McGrath is not which of the prevailing answers to this question can be proven, but which is more likely.

In an *a posteriori* scientific theology, there are no final deductive "proofs."

---

[105]To assume the reverse, i.e., that human observation determines the ontological status of the world, is called the epistemic fallacy (ibid., 212).

[106]Ibid., 224.

[107]Alister E. McGrath, *Nature*, vol. 1 of *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 218.

Nonetheless, the Christian framework has a higher degree of explanatory power than a merely naturalistic framework. This is especially evident when one examines the Christian concept of wisdom. One may rightly expect, given Christian theism, a correlation between the "only wise God" (1 Tim 1:17) and his creation. "What the natural sciences are forced to assume—in that it cannot be formally demonstrated without falling into some form of circularity of argument or demonstration—the Christian understanding of 'wisdom' allows to be affirmed on the basis of divine revelation, and correlated with the existence of a transcendent creator God, responsible both for the ordering of the world and the human ability to grasp and discern it."[108]

McGrath is clearly aware that some have interpreted this human ability to detect the ordering of the world as a "propensity to discern patterns and impose coherence within the human mind, rather than any intrinsic structuring of the natural world itself."[109] He points to Immanuel Kant who, for example, argued that this ordering owes its existence, not to an actual order in the world, but rather to "the noetic activity of

---

[108]Ibid., 222. Here McGrath is following T. F. Torrance, whom he quotes approvingly: "The concept of order arises in our minds through direct intuitive contact with the intelligible nature of reality which we acknowledge to be the ultimate judge on all questions of truth and falsity, order and disorder. . . . Belief in order, the conviction that, whatever may appear to the contrary in so-called random events, reality is finally and intrinsically orderly, thus constitutes an ultimate regulating factor in all rational and scientific activity." Thomas F. Torrance, "The Transcendental Role of Wisdom in Science," in *Science et Sagesse: Entretiens de l'Académie Internationale de Philosophie des Sciences, 1990*, ed. Evandro Agazzi (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1991), 67, quoted in McGrath, *Nature*, 222.

[109]McGrath, *Nature*, 223.

the human mind."[110] This is to say that "The mental interpretation of sense-data as representing something such as 'order' involves the imposition of something which is not itself given empirically in the sense-data."[111] As a critical realist McGrath is perfectly willing to admit that the human mind may impose order and discern patterns that are not there in reality.[112] Still, the possibility that there is an objective order present in the universe cannot be ruled out just because people often do construct their own systems of order. A false ordering may possibly be assigned to nature, but because reality sets boundaries around what the human mind constructs, there are reality-limits on one's constructions. Human constructions must not go beyond the constraints of the reality that they seek to describe.

In summary, while the sciences and theology share a realist outlook and a belief in reality's regularity, McGrath's proposal for the science-theology dialog offers a unique approach depending heavily upon the specifics of critical realism. By utilizing Bhaskar's concept of stratified reality, McGrath has developed model for dialogue that has a keen apologetic purpose; theology is not investigating a different reality, a subjective realm of values, but rather one layer of reality itself, and it is naïve to expect theology to talk about and investigate its object, namely, the uncreated God, in the same way that the sciences investigate the created order.

[110]Ibid.

[111]Ibid.

[112]Ibid.

Nature and Natural Theology

Critical realism also plays a role in McGrath's discussion of nature and natural theology. Because one's view of nature has a great deal to do with one's view of natural theology, the following section will first delineate McGrath's discussion of nature and then his formulation of natural theology. Critical realism's role in these developments will be highlighted.

Nature. McGrath presents "nature" as something in need of explanation rather than an explanation in and of itself. He points out that nature has been likened in reformed theology, for example, to a book, and that simple inquiry into the history of science reveals "that there have been multiple readings of nature throughout human culture."[113] Importantly, there is no neutral place from which to read this book. At this point McGrath applies to the concept of nature critical realism's notion that human beliefs are never formed apart from culture, concluding that nature is not a neutral category but rather a human construction. "There is no single 'correct' notion of nature, but a multiplicity of competing notions."[114]

Nature is an interpreted notion for McGrath, but as a critical realist he affirms and even argues that there is a reality to which the term points. When he says nature is an

---

[113]McGrath, *Science of God*, 42.

[114]Ibid., 36. These competing notions include but are not limited to (1) nature as a blind force that humans can and, some would say, should tame, (2) nature as the arena of human leisure and sport, (3) nature as a "wild kingdom, ripe with opportunity for exploration and adventure, and (4) nature as a "supply depot," provider for the needs of consumptuous humanity (see ibid., 38).

interpreted concept, he is primarily asserting that nature's identity (or essence) is ambiguous apart from the content supplied from various traditions. The natural world presents no clear or objective concept of nature. When the term "nature" is used, an assumed ontology of the reality of "nature" is already present.[115] "We view the world through theoretical spectacles, whether we realize this or not. We do not simply 'see' nature; we *see it as something*. So what is the best way of viewing nature? Or, if this question cannot be answered—and most would now say it cannot—what is the most authentically *Christian* way of viewing nature? What does Christian tradition see nature as?"[116]

This reasoning certainly does not entail, however, that there is no reality behind those interpretations. One reality alone exists, and there are various interpretations of nature that fit that reality to lesser and greater degrees. This is an important concept for the critical realist. While knowledge is not as clear and distinct (or indubitable) as the Enlightenment project insisted, knowledge is possible.

Nature is not a mere construction of the human mind. McGrath is not arguing for a robust postmodernism. His position "is not that the concept 'nature' is totally socially or culturally constructed, but that the notion is partly shaped by socially mediated factors."[117] Reality simply will not allow some interpretations of itself; how things are sets constraints around our formulations of them. These constraints make different

---

115McGrath, *Nature*, 115-17.

116McGrath, *Science of God*, 44. Emphasis his.

117McGrath, *Nature*, 13.

interpretations more or less plausible. "An ontology is clearly demanded , setting out

what the world *is*, so that our response is determined by the external constraints of reality,

not simply an internal decision to view matters in certain, potentially arbitrary,

manners."[118]

It is the Christian interpretation of nature that offers the most plausibility. In

particular, McGrath argues for the Christian notion of creation as the most accurate

account of nature.[119] Whereas nature is an interpreted concept, creation is a revealed

concept; "it is to be seen through the prism of revelation."[120] McGrath understands that

this claim raises the question of why the Christian view of nature is to be preferred.[121]

While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to investigate McGrath's lengthy answer

to this question, it will suffice to say that he believes the Christian doctrine of creation

has greater explanatory power than the alternatives. From the smallest matters of

scientific investigation, to worldview issues like the proper reading of the natural world,

reality is what is, and it constrains our formulations of it.

McGrath's case for the Christian reading of nature seems to rest on two

pillars.[122] First, the Christian doctrine of creation provides the best explanation of why

---

[118]Ibid., 116.

[119]Ibid., 135-91.

[120]Ibid., 137.

[121]Ibid., 133.

[122]This is not to say that there are no other lines of argument. For example, the Christian tradition has a powerful explanation of the existing plurality of readings of

the natural sciences are as successful as they are.[123] Order in the cosmos makes science

able to predict successfully, doing its job well. The Christian doctrine of creation

explains why this order exists: there is order in the cosmos because it was created by an

Orderer who, by means of a covenant, determined that the creation would speak of

him.[124]

The second pillar of McGrath's case for a Christian reading of nature is the

demonstrable weakness of its main rival, naturalism. He argues that this interpretation of

the natural world has far less explanatory power than the Christian understanding of

nature as the creation of the triune God. Naturalism assumes that all things are and can

be explained in scientific terms; that is, nothing "lies beyond the scope of scientific

explanation."[125] In terms of the history of metaphysics, naturalism is a development of

materialism.[126] The natural, material world, according to the naturalist, is the sum total of

reality.

McGrath finds the naturalist formulation to be an assertion on the level of

---

nature. McGrath points to Calvin's observation that sin affects the human capacity to
reflect on the world (ibid., 175).

[123]It should also be noted that McGrath discerns a resonance between the
doctrine of creation and the world of experience. This too offers support for the Christian
reading of nature as creation. However, none of these observations, the two pillars
discussed here included, offer "implicit *proof* of the doctrine" (ibid., 240).

[124]These issues are intimately related to McGrath's view of natural theology,
on which, see below.

[125]McGrath, *Nature*, 125.

[126]Ibid.

worldview rather than a carefully argued position. It is ontologically reductionistic in that it smuggles in an understanding of reality: "That which is real may be known through the natural sciences."[127] The difficulty with such an assertion is that it cannot pass its own test; the claim itself cannot be known by through the natural sciences. It is a philosophical, rather than scientific, statement that cannot be measured scientifically. Hence, naturalism "places an embargo on the transcendent, without offering any scientific justification for doing so."[128]

In summary, the Christian doctrine of creation stands above naturalism by way of its explanatory power—in particular, its power to explain the predictive successes of the natural sciences—and by way of its superior position to its main alternative, naturalism. In critical realist terms, reality (including the reality of Christian revelation) sets a boundary around the socially mediated notion of nature. Reality is most truly read as creation.

In light of McGrath's view of the concept of nature, it now remains to see what he has to say about natural theology. When humans construe nature as God interprets it—that is, as his own creation—they understand is best, and that construal makes natural theology possible. It is to McGrath's claims about natural theology that this chapter will now turn.

Natural theology. Historically, theologians have spoken of natural theology

___

[127]Ibid., 130.

[128]Ibid.

111

in significantly diverse ways. A brief summary of the history of the term will help situate

and clarify McGrath's own unique formulation.

The term "natural theology" appears to have been used first by the founder of

middle stoicism, Panaetius.[129] In this first usage, natural theology referred to theology

that corresponded "to the nature of the divine or the truth of God in distinction from

falsifications in the positive form of religion which rests on human positing."[130] It was

thus a theology that sought to be true to the divine nature itself, distancing itself from

ulterior political and literary motives.[131]

Moving beyond discussions of the nature of the divine, later thinkers used the

term natural theology in the context of arguments for the *existence* of the divine. The

Platonic notion that the physical realm, including physical movement, must ultimately be

explained by the unseen led, through the work of Aristotle, to the argument from motion

to the existence of a First Mover. [132] Here lie the seeds of what is now the most common

understanding of natural theology.

In contemporary scholarship, three types of natural theology can be discerned.

The first is reflected in a popular dictionary of theology that defines natural theology as

"truths about God that can be learned from created things (nature, man, world) by reason

---

[129]Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:76.

[130]Ibid., 77.

[131]Ibid.

[132]Ibid., 78.

alone."[133] This is now the traditional definition of the term, what William Abraham

refers to as the "intellectual attempt to provide support for any form of theism by means

of deductive or inductive appeal to premises that do not presume the truth of the theism in

question."[134] This is to say, "Faith and grace remain primary for all believers, but natural

theology offers the opportunity to establish certain truths by means common to all

persons."[135]

A second form of natural theology focuses its attention on human perception.

In particular, this form argues "for the justification of theistic belief on the grounds of

apparent awareness of the divine in nature and in personal experience."[136] Whereas the

focus in the first type of natural theology is on the strength of certain inductive and

deductive arguments, the focus in this second type is on "the reliability of our belief-

producing mechanisms represented by religious perception, or the *sensus divinitatus*, or

the inner witness of the Holy Spirit."[137] The recent work of William Alston stands

witness to a revival of this sort of natural theology.[138]

---

[133]J. Van Engen, "Natural Theology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 815.

[134]William Abraham, "Revelation and Natural Theology," in *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Engagement: A Dynamic Engagement*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 269.

[135]Van Engen, "Natural Theology," 816.

[136]Abraham, "Revelation and Natural Theology," 269.

[137]Ibid.

[138]William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). Idem, "Why Should There *Not*

The third and final form of natural theology—the one that McGrath seeks to revitalize and develop—discards the attempt to discover God apart from his special revelation of himself. William Abraham says this form "means the appeal to various features of the universe as confirmation of a prior appeal to special divine revelation. In this instance the propriety of the privileged site and articulated content of divine revelation is *assumed*."[139] Rather than starting from a neutral point, one presupposes that God has spoken and his human creatures have the content of his message. In critical realist terms there is no neutral place from which the task of natural theology can be done, and thus the preunderstanding brought to the natural order is given in Scripture, which licenses and governs one's observations of the natural order. Scripture is a lens or "prism" through which the natural order is seen.[140]

McGrath is clear to note his dependence on Karl Barth as he develops these insights concerning the place of divine revelation as the ground of all theological work. How God may be known and to what extent was a central theme in Barth's theological program; he argued that to even attempt to ask if knowledge of God is possible is to

---

be Experience of God?" in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Idem, "Religious Experience and Religious Belief," *Noûs* 16 (1982). Idem, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

[139]Abraham, "Revelation and Natural Theology," 269. Emphasis added.

[140]McGrath, *Nature*, 137.

[140]Ibid., 133.

attempt to stand in an uninhabitable place.[141] Man knows God only mediately, only by

God's revelation of himself. Apart from that giving and apart from that Word, he cannot

be known and so Barth rejects the notion of natural theology altogether because he sees it

as incompatible with the nature and abilities of mankind and an offense to the concept of

grace.[142] For Barth, the human being is in such a predicament with God that he can be

saved by God alone; salvation is only by God's grace. To approach knowledge of God

(in Barth, all knowledge of God is salvific) through nature is to undermine the concept of

grace and the fact of man's utter helplessness before God; natural theology is, simply put,

a refusal of grace. It is an attempt to know God apart from the one place he can be

known, that being in the person of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

---

[141]Barth avers, "The *in abstracto* and *a priori* question of the possibility of the knowledge of God obviously presupposes the existence of a place outside the knowledge of God itself from which this knowledge can be judged. . . . It presupposes the existence of a theory of knowledge as a hinterland where consideration of the truth, worth and competence of the Word of God, on which the knowledge of God is grounded, can for a time at least be suspended. But this is the very thing, which, from the point of view of its possibility, must not happen. Just as the reality of the Word of God in Jesus Christ bears its possibility within itself, as does also the reality of the Holy Spirit, by whom the Word of God comes to man, so too the possibility of the knowledge of God and therefore the knowability of God cannot be questioned *in vacuo*, or by means of a general criterion of knowledge delimiting the knowledge of God from without, but only from within this real knowledge itself." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, vol. 2, *The Doctrine of God*, pt. 1, trans. T.H.L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1957), 5.

[142]Barth's criticism of natural theology has been called "one of the revolutionary moments in Christian theology." Colin Grant, "Why Should Theology Be Unnatural?" *Modern Theology* 23 (2007): 96. Grant has also called Barth's rejection of natural theology "the shadow side" of his "resounding theology of grace." Ibid., 91. For the main lines of Barth's critique of natural theology, see Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply, "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock 2002), and Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2, pt. 1: 3-254.

One can readily discern in Barth what is now considered a critical realist point, namely that the nature of the object of investigation determines how it will be known. Ontology determines epistemology. An *already existing* God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. That very revelation determines how one must go about investigating God.

Significant agreement exists between McGrath and Barth concerning this priority of ontology over epistemology and on the priority of God's self-revelation. At the same time, and by contrast, McGrath finds no reason to abandon the natural theology project altogether. Part of Karl Barth's rejection of natural theology involved a rejection of the *analogia entis*, the belief that there is an ontological similarity between God and creation, a similarity sufficient to allow human beings to gain at least a partial understanding of God. McGrath finds no reason to reject such an analogy. Even if it were proven false, however, there remains another way to ground belief in the created order's capacity to reveal God. McGrath turns to a covenantal ground for natural theology. Even if there is no ontologically embedded capacity of nature to reveal God, it may be that God decided that it should be the case that something can be learned of him from his creation, provided the observer stands within the Christian framework that sees nature as creation.[143] This would seem to leave room for grace because one enters the Christian framework by grace.[144] McGrath summarizes: "The fact that there exists some

---

[143]McGrath, *Nature*, 297.

[144]This covenantal view of natural theology was the view of T. F. Torrance: "The whole world of signs which God in his covenant mercy has appointed to him only has revealing significance, and therefore can be interpreted only, in relation to his

form of correspondence between the creator and creation is not due to an inherent relation

of likeness, but to the free and gracious decision of God that some such correspondence

shall exist. We are thus dealing with an *analogia gratiae* rather than an *analogia*

entis."[145]

In defending a revised form of natural theology, McGrath finds it necessary to

take seriously and fully address the concerns of Barth. The primary reason McGrath

rejects Barth's complete abandonment of all natural theology is that Barth does not seem

to be aware of other forms of natural theology.[146] Natural theology is not in itself a

problematic enterprise, contends McGrath. Rather, the natural theology of the

Enlightenment (primarily the first of the three types of natural theology mentioned earlier

in this chapter) is what Barth rightly criticized. The genealogical beginnings of this form

of natural theology can be traced to the seventeenth century. Thinkers like Augustine,

---

covenant will for communion with man and in the actualization of that covenant in the
course of his redemptive acts in history. Thus while the whole of creation is formed to
serve as the sphere of divine self-revelation, it cannot be interpreted or understood out of
itself, as if it had inherent likeness or being to the Truth, but only in light of the history of
the covenant of grace and its appointed signs and orders and events in the life of the
covenant people. . . . In this way, Reformed theology certainly holds that God reveals
himself in creation, but not by some so-called 'light of nature,' and it certainly holds that
God's revelation makes use of and is mediated through a creaturely objectivity, but it
does not hold that an examination of this creaturely objectivity of itself can yield
knowledge of God." Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith* (London: James Clark,
1959), liii, quoted in McGrath, *Nature* 297.

[145]McGrath, *Nature*, 298.

[146]Barth's work stands in the background of McGrath's own theology at a
number of points. McGrath states "It is impossible to understate the positive impact
which Barth has upon my estimate of, and enthusiasm for, theology as a serious
intellectual discipline" (McGrath, *Nature*, xv-xvi).

Aquinas, and Calvin were interested in the natural world and the relationship between faith and reason, but the seventeenth century penchant for questioning authority gave rise to a distinctively modern natural theology.[147] The Bible and the church were decreasingly viewed as sources of religious knowledge. According to McGrath, "The Bible was declared to be difficult to interpret, laden with ideas and values which reflected the archaic religious beliefs and practices of an obsolete Judaism, and to represent at best a poor embodiment of notions which could be developed and justified through the judicious exercise of unaided reason."[148] Free thinking was the goal of this so-called "Age of Reason," and a dated piece of literature like the Bible, the truth of which was by no means accessible or evident to all, was seen as a barrier to this free thinking. The same may be said for the voice of the church. Its commitment to preserve the truth once and for all delivered was increasingly perceived as a barrier to free thinking and to intellectual liberation.[149] The book of nature was open to all and new developments in the sciences were clearing its formerly blurred pages.[150]

As this development took place, the necessity of the church and its book (the book of Scripture) fell into disfavor. The book of nature had been around for a much longer period of time than the church or its book, and for many this earlier book was the

---

[147]Ibid., 241-48.

[148]Ibid., 245.

[149]Ibid., 245-46.

[150]For a sampling of these developments, see Michael R. Matthews, *The Scientific Background to Modern Philosophy: Selected Readings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 45-158.

truest of the various sources of religious knowledge. "Christianity was, at best, simply a republication of an older religion of nature; at worst, it represented the corruption of this earlier version."[151]

For McGrath, the project of natural theology was hijacked by these seventeenth century thinkers. When natural theology is conducted within their framework, Barth's criticisms stand; natural theology is a fruitless endeavor, and its possibility is ruled out by theological convictions that arise from God's self-revelation in Christ. These faulty methods and assumptions of Enlightenment natural theology continue to color assumptions about the value of other forms of natural theology. Enlightenment natural theology, however, is at best a caricature:

> Christian theologians—such as Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin—had developed what might legitimately be styled "natural theologies" long before this polemical turn had led to this enterprise being seen in this new light. It is therefore imperative to be aware that the intellectual climate of the "Age of Reason" has had a major, yet largely unacknowledged, impact on the manner in which modern theologians view premodern styles of natural theology—often inadvertently imposing a modern agenda upon the ages which were innocent of the polemical considerations which are today taken for granted.[152]

Thus, while McGrath's own view of natural theology has been shaped by the discussion between Barth and his detractors, he is not willing to rule out natural theology altogether.[153] What McGrath offers is a natural theology that comes from within a revealed Christian tradition but which nevertheless still speaks to an audience who does

---

[151]McGrath, *Nature*, 248.

[152]Ibid.

[153]While McGrath imbibes the priority Barth gives to divine revelation, he nevertheless levels a number of criticisms against Barth's position. See ibid., 269-79.

not accept Christian revelation as such.[154] "Natural theology cannot become a totally autonomous discipline, independent of revelation, in that it depends on the revealed insight that God is creator of the natural order."[155] If it attempts to start without any presupposition of religion or religious beliefs, it will not stand. Nature must first be construed as the work of the triune God—as creation—and then natural theology may commence.

Here the critical realist formulation of the concept of nature comes to the fore in McGrath's formulation of natural theology; it commences from within a framework supplied by the self-revealing God.[156] The much-sought-after view from nowhere is a fiction, and while there are a number of frameworks from which natural theology may be done, the one given by God alone yields trustworthy results. "The fundamental assumption of a responsible natural theology . . . is that we are authorized by Scripture to seek partial disclosure of the glory of God through the works of God in *creation*."[157] Just as nature is understood in terms of the Christian framework, or preunderstanding (as creation), so too is natural theology done from within that work. Definitions of natural theology such as that of William Alston—"The enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious

---

[154]Whether this is possible is the subject of much debate and will be taken up in the critical evaluation of McGrath in the next chapter.

[155]McGrath, *Nature*, 296.

[156]Ibid.

[157]Ibid., 191. Emphasis added.

beliefs"[158]—are ruled out.[159]

Conclusion

McGrath's critical realist approach to theological method surfaces at a number of points. This chapter has focused on the methodological claims in his work where critical realism is most palpable. Evidence from McGrath's own writings, evidence indicating his basic commitment to evangelicalism and his indebtedness to critical realism, has been delineated. First, McGrath's concerns about naïve modernist methodologies, on one hand, and antirealist postliberal theory, on the other, draw him to the middle ground of critical realism. Next, critical realism plays an integral role in McGrath's natural theology and in his vision for the dialogue between science and theology. In particular, it is the critical realist claim that ontology determines epistemology that gives McGrath leverage in his argument that one should not expect theological science to look like other sciences, yet this fact does not make theology any less of a scientific enterprise. Chapter 4 will provide a critical evaluation of McGrath's actual application of critical realism, as seen here in chapter 3, as well as his case for utilizing critical realism in his theological method.

---

[158]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 289.

[159]McGrath, *Nature*, 296.

CHAPTER 4

EVALUATION OF MCGRATH'S CRITICAL
REALIST METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter is both evaluative and constructive. Alister McGrath has

discovered in critical realism a fruitful methodological tool, yet one that is easily

mishandled. The evaluation in this chapter will draw a number of positive conclusions

about McGrath's use of critical realism. At the same time, where he has made poor or

underdeveloped application of critical realism, both correction and suggestions for further

development will be offered.

The evaluation in this chapter proceeds in the following way. First ,

McGrath's specific case for critical realism as a better epistemological alternative to

naïve realism and postmodern antirealism will be evaluated. Second, McGrath's

practical use of critical realism as it appears in the major thematic areas described in

chapter 3 will be evaluated. In particular, critical realist commitments are a major part of

McGrath's rejection of postliberal methodology, his approach to Scripture and tradition,

and his proposal for the science-theology dialogue, particularly with regard to his

renovated natural theology; accordingly these four areas will be evaluated.

The Case for Realism

A critique of McGrath's defense of critical realism logically begins with his

broader case for realism, because if realism is indefensible, critical realism will likewise be indefensible. Once McGrath's case for realism is critiqued, his move from realism to critical realism may then be evaluated.

While a number of technical definitions of realism can be found in the philosophic and theological literature, most of these distinctions are generally unnecessary for the purposes of this chapter; thus, only a few characteristics—those applicable to the present evaluation McGrath—will be used here.[1] Realism may be defined, as it has been throughout this dissertation, as a broad commitment to the claim that reality is what it is whether or not it is perceived by human beings.[2] Due to the generality of its assertion, this broad understanding of realism has been called "global realism."[3] In William Alston's terms, global realism is "an unqualifiedly general metaphysical position, one that concerns whatever there is."[4] In short, global realism is the commitment that what "is" exists in its own right and cannot be reduced to the status of human mental construction. Within the broad commitment of global realism lies what Alston calls "departmental realisms," a category of realisms that points to the mind-

---

[1]For a presentation of four of these realisms and their contrasting anti-realisms, see Susan Haack, "Realism," *Synthese* 73 (1987): 275-99. For a brief comment on Haack, see Peter Byrne, *God and Realism*, Ashgate Philosophy of Religion Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 2.

[2]Conversely, anti-realism is generally the denial of this claim.

[3]William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 75.

[4]Ibid.

independent status of "this or that kind of thing."[5] Departmental realisms address only one segment of reality, including: (1) scientific realism, which asserts that physical objects, whether they are theoretical or detectable through sensation, are real; (2) theological realism, which affirms that God or the divine is real; and (3) moral realism, which claims that there are mind-independent moral standards.[6] Local realisms share a commitment to global realism, yet it is their respective commitments to one segment of reality that distinguishes them from one another.

A realist with respect to one local segment of reality will not necessarily be a realist with respect to other segments. In other words, a person who is a global realist may hold to a number of local realisms while denying a number of others. For example, one may be a scientific realist while at the same time espousing theological antirealism. Such an individual would argue for the mind-independent reality of stars, planets, desks, and human beings, for example, but might deny the existence of God.

A Case for Global Realism

Global realism has been defended in a number of ways. Technically a case for some local realism entails that global realism is also true. This is the approach that McGrath has taken, arguing for scientific realism, which would entail global realism. Other thinkers have made more direct cases for global realism, however. Such examples

---

[5]Ibid.

[6]More specifically, moral realism focuses on the question of morality and contends for objective moral standards. Moral statements may be assigned truth values if moral realism is true.

add weight to McGrath's position for those who are not compelled by his approach to defending scientific realism. One such example, the common-sense argument of Caleb Miller, will be considered here.

Miller articulates a common-sense argument for global realism.[7] He does not intend to *prove* the existence of an external world. Understanding that proof is a lofty, and in most circumstances, impossible goal, Miller shows that it is entirely proper to argue that realism is more likely than not. Thus, his conclusion is that realism is more rational than antirealism,[8] where "a belief is rational iff [if and only if] it seems to the agent, by her own best lights, to be well suited to accomplishing her epistemic goal of holding to that belief iff it is true."[9] Miller demonstrates, in a brief, two-step argument, that the realist view satisfies this criterion better than its rivals.

---

[7]Caleb Miller, "Realism, Antirealism, and Common Sense," in *Realism and Antirealism*, ed. William Alston (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2002),13-25. Miller defines realism in the way it is being used in this dissertation; it is "the view that the reality of the external world of concrete objects, and the truth about such reality, are what they are independently of human beliefs, conceptualizations, descriptions, sentences, perceptions, conventions, languages, and so on. . . . By 'antirealism' I shall mean the denial of realism" (ibid., 13).

[8]Ibid., 15. The rationality to which Miller appeals is epistemic rationality which holds to a belief just in case (i.e., if and only if) it is true. Since some antirealists will argue that he is begging the question by assuming that there is such a thing as truth, he says, "To mollify such antirealists, I am willing to accept a paraphrase according to which the epistemic perspective on a given declarative sentence, p, is that of a person who seeks to believe that p iff p [i.e., "that p if and only if p"]. Although I shall continue to describe rationality and the epistemic perspective in terms of truth, nothing will be lost to the argument if the reader substitutes the foregoing paraphrase, or any grammatically appropriate transformation of it, wherever I employ the concept of truth in those discussions" (ibid.).

[9]Ibid., 16.

First, he notes the *prima facie* rationality of accepting realism over antirealism. Providing a much more basic case than McGrath's appeal to scientific success, Miller notes that in the world of sense perception, common sense tells one that when a person comes to know that a given tree is over ten feet tall, the tree does not at that moment become over ten feet tall. According to common sense, the height of the tree "is not within our cognitive control."[10] This is to say, on first observance our intuition is that we *learn* of the tree being ten feet tall, not that we *make* it ten feet tall.[11] At this point in the common sense case for realism, all that is being claimed is that human intuition is heavily inclined towards realism in the most mundane of situations; there are no stronger intuitions about the height of the tree than the one which says it is what it is apart from human observation. Along these lines, even the antirealist Richard Rorty writes, "What really needs debate between the pragmatist and the intuitive realist is *not* whether we really have intuitions to the effect that 'truth is more than assertability' . . . .

---

[10]Ibid.

[11]Examples could be multiplied here. For instance, one might appeal to the strong intuition that stars cannot possibly be the creation of the human mind. The same constellations (and the stars comprising them) were reported centuries ago and it would be ridiculous to say that some current astronomer is responsible for their existence. These constellations were not constructed by the human mind; they were discovered and continue to be observed. Furthermore, it is seems obvious that the human mind has no mechanism by which it might construct such entities. No one would take seriously a charge to construct a new star by thinking about it. The strong human intuition is that stars are what they are independent of the human mind and that if all human minds were suddenly annihilated, the stars—or, in the case of long vanished stars, the light from stars—would not suddenly cease to exist.

Of course we have such intuitions. How could we escape having them."[12] Here, Rorty essentially admits that the dictates of common sense demand realism, yet one may then ask, "Why accept the dictates of common sense?"

After demonstrating the power of the realist intuition (i.e., the tree example), Miller considers possible reasons to reject this intuition and finds none compelling; this is the second step in his argument. If there are objections to the common-sense notion that realism is true and they can be reasonably answered, people are more rational in maintaining their common-sense intuition about realism, given that common sense is very strong and almost universally delivered. One should not, however, accept the common-sense, realist perception of the world if it can be undercut by defeaters.[13]

One possible defeater questions the possibility of cognitively accessing reality. Miller summarizes this view:

> Even if realism were true, we could have no way of knowing that it is. And this is not just because we can never be justifiably sure enough of realism to count as knowledge. It is rather that we can have no cognitive access to anything that is even relevant to the question. The realist convictions of common sense are, then, simply not indicative of the truth. But if we cannot have any reason for believing that realism is true, we should just stick to that to which we do have cognitive access. That to which we do have access are such things as our own cognitive life and concepts, our own conceptual schemes, language, reality as known or

---

[12]Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xxix-xxx, quoted in Miller, "Realism, Antirealism, and Common Sense," 16-17.

[13]Defeaters are points that mitigate against a given conclusion. A distinction is usually made between rebutting defeaters (which address the conclusion directly) and undercutting defeaters (which focus on the connection of reasons to certain conclusions rather than the conclusions themselves). J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 88.

conceptualized by us, and the like.[14]

This reasoning is also seen in the antirealist statements of Hilary Putnam: "The notion of a 'thing in itself' makes no sense; and not because 'we cannot know the things in themselves,' [rather] we don't know what we are talking about."[15] For Putnam, reality is only what humans conceptualize. The crux of this claim is that "The human mind has access only to what is already cognitively shaped or constituted. Given that we are the ones who conceptualize, know, believe, perceive, and so on, we can have cognitive access only to things as we conceptualize them, know them, describe them, perceive them, and so on."[16] "Things" cannot be accessed apart from our cognition, but, Miller responds, this epistemological objection in no way undercuts the possibility of realism. "If the problem with realism is just that we have no way of *knowing* that it is true, that, in itself, is not a reason for believing that it is not true."[17] To argue that there is no mind independent reality because we cannot know mind independent reality is fallacious.[18]

Miller thinks that there are two areas of confusion that make arguments against realism seem more tenable than they really are. The first is confusion between cognitive

---

[14]Miller, "Realism, Antirealism, and Common Sense," 20.

[15]Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1987), 36, quoted in Miller, "Realism, Antirealism, and Common Sense," 20.

[16]Miller, "Realism, Antirealism, and Common Sense," 21.

[17]Ibid. Emphasis added.

[18]This is what Bhaskar calls the epistemic fallacy. Margaret S. Archer, Andrew Collier, and Douglas V. Porpora, *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

states and cognitive content. One may wonder what it is that human beings are perceiving when they are in the act of perceiving. It might be argued that humans only perceive some form of perception. When one perceives an apple, for example, he is not perceiving the apple but his perception of the apple. Miller explains, however, that "Although we cannot perceive without perception, it doesn't follow we can perceive only perceptions. . . . Although beliefs and knowledge are cognitive states, it does not follow that we can have beliefs only about, or knowledge only of, cognitive states."[19] Nevertheless, some antirealists realize the force of this response and provide a different answer to the question of what humans perceive. They concede that humans perceive objects, but they deny that objects are directly perceived. Objects, they say, are not entirely mind-dependent: "After all, how can we possibly perceive objects other than as we perceive them, have knowledge of the truth other than as we know it, and so forth?"[20] This alternative approach leads to the second confusion that makes arguments for antirealism seem more tenable than they really are. Miller explains, "Of course, we can't perceive anything except as we perceive it. It does not follow, however, that we cannot perceive anything as it is in itself. That inference requires the assumption that the way we perceive can't be the way it is in itself. But that assumption simply begs the question against the realist who takes herself to have cognitive access to reality and truth in themselves. And that includes most of us."[21]

---

[19]Miller, "Realism, Antirealism, and Common Sense," 22.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

Given these plausible responses to the main defeaters of realism, Miller concludes that the most threatening challenges to realism can be answered. As he claims in a summary of his argument, "Rebutting defeaters [of realism] are either obviously false or much less plausible for [those who find common sense intuitively compelling] than is realism.[22]

McGrath's Case for Scientific Realism

McGrath's case for global realism is much more specific than Miller's, in that it arises out of a case for scientific realism, a case that in turn emerges from his observations of the natural sciences. McGrath contends that the natural sciences assume scientific realism, which maintains that there is a physical, sometimes observable, testable reality whose identity or nature is not determined by the human observer.

---

[22]Ibid., 23. For those who reply by simply stating that they do not find common sense intuitively compelling, Miller says the quick answer is to "point out that my argument is not meant to convince such a person. But that response is appropriate only to those who do not find the realist implications of common sense initially compelling" (ibid.). Since these people are rare, Miller argues, the more troublesome objection might be the person who initially finds realism compelling but not after being exposed to certain defeaters. While philosophical arguments of this sort can be quite compelling for both sides, one must not forget that arguments are only one of the things that might possibly justify a belief. One could loose an argument with a skeptic over whether or not one was sitting in a chair, yet he could be justified in believing it anyway because he has a more direct line of evidence. "The epistemic force of the argument [that one is sitting in a chair] would be miniscule compared with the epistemic force of my experience itself. My experience properly makes it seem much more obvious to me that I am sitting in a chair than any such argument could. . . . Although I am aware that I can't prove realism is true. When I consider the question, it seems utterly obvious to me that the existence of the tree and its having the properties that it does is quite independent of our cognition of it. I suppose more philosophers would agree, were we not habituated by our preoccupation with arguments to disregard the intuitive pull of other considerations such as the phenomena of perceptual experience" (ibid., 24-25).

Scientific realism addresses only one division of reality, (the one with which natural scientists concern themselves),[23] yet it entails the global realism defined above, although McGrath appears to be unaware of the distinction between the two. He simply speaks of "realism" when he addresses the scientific realism of the natural sciences. For instance, he counts himself among those scientists for whom, "The credibility of realism arises directly from the experimental method," simply calling the scientific realism assumed in the experimental method "realism."[24] Although McGrath ignores the distinction between global realism and the specific local form which he defends, namely, scientific realism, this is not detrimental to his case for realism because if any local realism is true then global realism follows. In other words, a case for scientific realism (a particular local realism) is a case for global realism, although not the only one, as we have seen from Miller.

McGrath's case for scientific realism is largely pragmatic. His observations of the practices, assumptions, and results of natural scientists lead him to the conclusion that "realism works."[25] More specifically, the ability of science to make predictions and explain human experiences is difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend if realism is not the case. Realism's ability to make sense of science's predictive success is difficult to deny and it is stronger, McGrath contends, than other paths one may take to the realist

---

[23]Granted, for some scientists the empirical or physical is the only reality or strata. This is not, however, necessarily the case.

[24]Alister E. McGrath, *Reality*, vol. 2 of *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 123.

[25]Ibid.

position. In particular, McGrath compares the way scientists arrive at realism to the way

philosophers might arrive at realism. He notes that scientists usually do not depend on

rigorous philosophical arguments to lead them to realism. For example, scientists do not

become realists, "because, having read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in some detail,

they find his account of the transcendental method empirically implausible."[26] Rather,

the realism of scientists emerges as they practice science, as they build their machines

and conduct their experiments. No *a priori* arguments lead these scientists to the position

of scientific realism, which is an "*empirical* notion, in that it is grounded in an actual

encounter with reality."[27] Simply put, it is more reasonable to believe that the methods

science uses to make aviation and numerous other endeavors possible have an ontological

reality apart from human perception.[28] The crux of McGrath's argument for scientific

realism was given in chapter 3 and bears repeating here:

> The remarkable and predictive successes of the natural sciences are widely held to
> point to the independent reality of what it describes. Airplanes fly, and they fly, at
> least in part, on account of the relation between pressure and kinetic energy first set
> out by Daniel Bernoulli in 1738. Television and radio work, at least in part on
> account of the predictions made by Maxwell's theory of electromatic radiation. . . .
> And what more effective explanation may be offered for this success than the

---

[26]Ibid.

[27]Alister E. McGrath, *The Science of God: An Introduction to Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 127.

[28]Alternate explanations of this state of affairs run counter to common sense and have considerable challenges, the solutions to which McGrath finds unconvincing. In particular he mentions idealism, positivism, and instrumentalism, all of which he finds to be wanting with respect to the predictive success of the sciences. McGrath, *Science of God*, 129-34.

simple assertion that what scientific theories describe is *really* present?[29]

This line of thinking is widespread in the scientific community, so widespread that McGrath finds realism to be "the predominant working philosophy of the natural sciences."[30] Just one of many examples of this predominantly realist orientation comes from physicist Michael Redhead: "Physicists in their unreflective and intuitive attitude to their work, the way they talk and think among themselves, tend to be realists about the entities they deal with, and while being tentative as to what they say about these entities and their exact properties and interrelations, they generally feel that what they are trying to do, and to some degree successfully, is to 'get a handle on reality.'"[31] This posture extends well beyond physics into all of the natural sciences; science's intent is not to create reality but to discover it.

In sum, McGrath's argument moves from science's predictive success to the observation that for science to succeed in this way, it must be dealing with real entities. It should be noted, however, that some observers are skeptical about the way this argument is framed. Lauden, for example, believes attempts to deduce realism from the predictive success of the sciences commits the formal logical fallacy of affirming the consequent. He opines,

---

[29]Alister E. McGrath, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 140. Emphasis added. Also see McGrath, *Science of God*, 125.

[30]McGrath, *Science of God*, 126.

[31]Michael Redhead, *From Physics to Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9, quoted in McGrath, *Science of God*, 127.

It is little short of remarkable that realists would imagine that their critics would find the argument for realism compelling. Ever since antiquity critics of epistemic realism have based their skepticism on deep-rooted conviction that the fallacy of affirming the consequent is indeed fallacious. When Bellarmine or Hume doubted that certain theories which saved the phenomena were warrantable as true, their doubts were based on a belief that the exhibition that a theory had some true consequences left entirely open the truth status of the theory.[32]

It is not that predictive success in the sciences rules out realism; rather, it leaves the question unsettled. Lauden seems to assume that the argument must be laid out in the following way. Premise 1 would state if realism is true, then the sciences will be able to make certain predictions successfully (if given a certain starting time, distance, and going a certain speed, then a car will arrive at point x at time y, for example).[33] Premise 2 would state that the sciences do make certain predictions successfully. Finally, the conclusion would be that realism is in fact true. Formulated this way, the fallacy of affirming the consequent does occur. Nevertheless, to debunk the argument in this way is problematic because many theorists argue with a slightly different formulation that does not commit the fallacy. They place the claim about the predictive success of science in the antecedent of premise 1 in order to make the argument read as follows. Premise 1: If science is able to predict successfully, then realism follows. Premise 2: Science is able to predict successfully. Conclusion: Realism follows. Constructed in this way the argument takes the valid form of affirming the antecedent (*modus ponens*) and is therefore unproblematic. Of course one of the premises may be questioned, thereby questioning

---

[32]Larry Lauden, "A Confutation of Convergent Realism," *Philosophy of Science* 48:1 (March 1984), 45.

[33]In a statement like this, the "if" clause is the antecedent and the "then" clause is the consequent.

the soundness of the argument, but the form is valid.

McGrath does need to address more deeply the soundness of the argument by mapping out how he moves from predictive success to realism. In other words, why is premise 1, namely, "If science predicts successfully, then realism is true," a true premise? So far, his work does not show by rigorous argumentation why predictive success entails realism. He might suggest that it is a connection that does not need argumentation, that it is one of those basic observations that one just "sees" directly by philosophical intuition, but this will not likely satisfy many of his detractors.[34] McGrath also needs to address those who question the truth of premise 2, namely, that science does have predictive successes rather than merely apparent successes.[35] Again, while he may conclude that the small segment of ultra-postmodern thinkers who would question science's ability to make accurate predictions do not need to be addressed, a full defense of realism must address their arguments. Nevertheless, even if the claim that the successes of science are only apparent could be sustained, there are other ways to argue for global realism, as seen in the work of Miller. While McGrath needs to develop and expand his case for scientific realism, addressing concerns over the truth of premises 1 and 2, Miller's case for global realism provides a suitable starting point from which critical realism can be developed, and McGrath has done enough work to claim a certain rationality for scientific realism.

---

[34]A good introduction to this challenge can be found in André Kukla and Joel Walmsley, "A Theory's Predictive Success Does Not Warrant Belief in the Unobservable Entities It Postulates," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Science*, ed. Christopher Hitchcock (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 133-48.

[35]Ibid., 142. Kukla and Walmsley argue specifically that "the success of science does not even warrant the weakest realist thesis" (ibid., 133).

Indubitable arguments are just not possible—a more radical skeptic is always near with more questions—but a spectrum certainly exists, along which exist better and worse arguments.

McGrath's Case for Critical Realism

Critical realists are realists in the global sense and hold to at least one kind of local realism, although neither global realism nor local realism entails critical realism. In other words, there are global and local realists who are not critical realists. Specifically, claims about realism are claims about the mind-independent existence of objects or entities having a distinct ontology, but this is only part of the claim of the more specific critical realism, which not only affirms the mind-independent status of reality but also makes various claims about the nature of human access to this reality, moving beyond the predominantly ontological claims of realism to also include certain epistemological claims. One may wonder at this point why McGrath chooses to move beyond realism to an affirmation of critical realism. It is to this question the next section turns.

Problematic Alternatives
to Critical Realism

To begin, critical realism seems to McGrath to be only the remaining option in lieu of the various problems with naïve realism and postmodern antirealism. McGrath's choice to move beyond realism to an affirmation of critical realism is rooted in what he takes to be valid criticisms of Enlightenment epistemology (naïve realism) raised by postmodern scholarship, and at the same time, a dissatisfaction with the solutions to these criticisms offered by postmodern scholars. Critical realism's epistemology is less problematic than these two extremes.

136

McGrath finds much to affirm in the contention that humans are embedded in particular cultures and situations and that they therefore perceive only under the influence of those cultures and situations. As Arthur F. Holmes once put it, "Our quests for knowledge . . . are limited and problem-laden, for we are finite and never fully transcend the changing conditions on which we depend."[36] Postmodernists have tended, however, to take this observation about the situatedness of those seeking knowledge to an extreme that McGrath cannot accept—specifically, they have concluded with a strong program of constructivism, which posits that human knowledge is a construction rather than a response to reality. In this view there are multiple "realities" that are constructed by individuals (or sometimes communities), but there is no single, ontologically distinct way things are.

Although McGrath does accept the observation about the situated nature of human knowledge, he rejects the drastic conclusion of strong constructivists, adopting critical realism instead. While the postmodern and anti-realist position of constructivism claims that "The human mind freely constructs its ideas without any reference to an alleged external world," critical realism maintains that "Reality is apprehended by the human mind which attempts to express and accommodate that reality as best it can with the tools at its disposal—such as mathematical formulae or mental models."[37] Furthermore, the observation that reality cannot be investigated apart from one's context

---

[36]Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a Worldview*, Studies in a Christian Worldview, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 130.

[37]McGrath, *Reality*, 195.

and prejudices "does not pose a challenge to the notion that there exists a world, independent of the observer. It is to acknowledge that the knower is involved in the process of knowing, and that this involvement must somehow be expressed within a realist perspective on the world."[38] The resulting critical realism contends that there is an objective and knowable world and yet, as David Naugle suggests, a certain degree of prejudice "inevitably accompanies human knowledge and demands an ongoing critical conversation about the essentials of one's outlook."[39] Every perception involves some sort of judgment, and "this complex perceptive or interpretive process can vary depending on the circumstances of the person."[40]

McGrath acknowledges that this critical realist response to constructivism makes the pursuit of knowledge more complicated than naïve realists would have it, yet there are ways to move forward. Knowledge is possible, but because the knower is involved in the act of perception, he must be critically aware when accessing the real world. Nevertheless, it seems that on a constructivist account, constructivism itself is problematic, as noted by Jarett Leplin:

> It is confidently claimed by many historians and sociologists of knowledge that *all* research is biased. I wonder how this fact was discovered. It is not tautological or otherwise self-evident. Evidently it took inquiry—that is, *research*—to discover it.

---

[38]Ibid., 197.

[39]David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 324. The critical realist position has recently been embraced by Darrell L. Bock in his *Purpose Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).

[40]Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 262.

> But to the extent that research is biased, the conclusions to which it leads are untrustworthy. So this conclusion, that all research is biased, must, if correct, be untrustworthy. But of course if it is incorrect, then it is also untrustworthy. It could be true, but we cannot have good reason to think so.[41]

The conclusions constructivists so emphatically assert would themselves be constructions, thus demanding little assent.

For McGrath, critical realism provides the best response to the dual truths of realism and situated knowledge (i.e., the fact that one's situation in life affects one's investigation of reality). Nevertheless, some evangelicals think McGrath's version of critical realism, specifically his disparagement of certain aspects of modernity (especially naïve realism), puts him in a position against the theory of truth as correspondence. For example Douglas Groothuis directly links McGrath with postmodernists who have rejected the correspondence theory of truth.[42] In his dissertation on McGrath's scientific theology, James Dew has nevertheless called into question Groothuis's judgment. He counters, "McGrath does not appear to be rejecting correspondence *per se*, but Enlightenment versions of correspondence which require a one-to-one correspondence between the object and the proposition. This kind of correspondence assumes a complete objectivity on the part of the knower which is difficult to maintain."[43] Dew reaches this

---

[41]Jarrett Leplin, *A Novel Defense of Scientific Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

[42]Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 130.

[43]James K. Dew, Jr., "Science as the *Ancilla Theologiae*: A Critical Assessment of Alister E. McGrath's Scientific Theology from an Evangelical Philosophical/Theological Perspective" (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008),195.

conclusion because there are a number of places where McGrath says things that imply a correspondence theory of truth. For example, McGrath affirms, "A scientific theology holds that theories, whether scientific or theological, are not free creations of the human mind, but are constructed in response to an encounter with an existing reality. Theory is responsible, in that it is accountable to the community of faith for the manner in which it depicts its corporate vision of reality—a vision which it did not create in the first place, and to which it represents a considered and faithful response."[44] Again, McGrath contends that his entire project "is impelled, by its vision of reality, to attempt to offer an account of the totality of all things, believing that the Christian tradition both encourages such an enterprise in the first place, and in the second, makes the necessary resources available through its understanding of the economy of salvation, particularly its doctrine of creation."[45] In light of these and other evidences, Dew has rightly interpreted McGrath to be suggesting that "religious doctrines are only valid if they correspond to the reality they seek to explain."[46]

Nancey Murphy has presented another case against McGrath's critical realism that, if correct, would seem to lock McGrath into the Enlightenment epistemology from

---

[44]Alister E. McGrath, *Theory*, vol. 3 of *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), xi, quoted in Dew, "Science as the *Ancilla Theologiae*," 193.

[45]McGrath, *Theory*, 194, quoted in Dew, "Science as the *Ancilla Theologiae*,"193.

[46]Dew, "Science as the *Ancilla Theologiae*,"193.

140

which he seeks refuge.[47] Her argument against critical realism centers on what she takes to be its unbreakable ties with a discredited modernism, especially modernism's epistemological foundationalism and its related theory of language.

The foundationalism Murphy addresses "assumed that it was the philosopher's job to justify the knowledge claims of other disciplines by finding indubitable beliefs upon which they depend."[48] Furthermore, the modernist theory of language tied meaning to language's (supposed) reference to the world: "Language was thought to work by naming objects and by reflecting or representing facts about those objects."[49] Murphy finds within critical realism a similar governing metaphor "of knowledge as a picture or representation of reality."[50]

Murphy recognizes that critical realists have retreated from these two positions to a degree, but because critical realism still occupies space governed by these modernist categories, it is on unsure ground. She writes, "The association of critical realism with modern thought warrants a practical caution. Conceptual changes once begun seldom (if ever) reverse. Therefore, it may be wise to use a postmodern basis for dialogue between science and religion lest we build our house upon sand."[51] Because critical realism

---

[47]Nancey Murphy, "Relating Theology and Science in a Postmodern Age," *Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences Bulletin* 7 (1987): 1-10.

[48]Ibid., 2.

[49]Ibid., 3.

[50]Ibid., 8.

[51]Ibid., 7.

operates from within modernism, despite its slight revisions, it is to be discredited; modernism's failure, Murphy argues, is a failure for critical realists.

McGrath's response to Murphy is very brief. He recognizes her main objection to critical realism to be its ties to a now discredited epistemological foundationalism.[52] Linking critical realism and epistemological foundationalism as Murphy has done, however, seems to be a premature judgment: "The rejection of classical foundationalism does not necessarily entail a rejection of realism."[53] In this respect, McGrath points specifically to writers like W. V. O. Quine, William Alston, and Nicholas Wolterstorff who find no necessary link between anti-foundationalism in epistemology and antirealism in metaphysics.[54] Indeed, this is a significant problem with Murphy's case, and McGrath's response creates intellectual room for him to move forward with his own use of critical realism. However, in the interest of supporting McGrath's theological use of critical realism, additional critiques of Murphy will be now discussed. Further criticism is important because the critical realism she tries to discredit plays a significant and crucial role in McGrath's methodology.

Murphy criticizes the commitment of critical realism to the idea that

---

[52]McGrath, *Reality*, 33. Also see McGrath, *Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*, 155.

[53]McGrath, *Reality*, 33.

[54]McGrath, *Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*, 155. He directs the reader to Alston, *A Realist View of Truth*, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Entitled Christian Belief," in *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J Wildman (New York: Routledge, 1996), 145-50. Also see McGrath, *Reality*, 33-35, where he discusses this same issue with reference to W. V. O Quine.

knowledge represents reality. This criticism rests, however, on the notion that all notions

of representation or reference in the philosophy of language are now discredited. A brief

perusal of relevant literature, however, suggests that this is far from a settled issue.[55]

While there is agreement that language cannot be reduced to *mere* reference, proving that

it *never* refers is an altogether different issue. In theology, in particular, some have

questioned whether metaphorical language can refer to the reality called God, but there is

often a hidden assumption in these critiques that suggests, because language or metaphors

cannot comprehensively or directly refer to God, that "real" talk of God must be

abandoned. However, reference need not be direct, nor comprehensive, to involve real

objects. A mediated theological language, using metaphor, can still be said to refer to

God's reality, albeit in incomplete ways. In short, Murphy's critique of reference seems

to demand that it be an all-or-nothing reference, but this is highly problematic.[56]

Furthermore, Murphy's critique of critical realism based on its epistemological

ties with foundationalism can be challenged. Classical foundationalism was rejected

largely because it could not live up to its own requirements. In particular, the classical

claim that a belief must be basic—indubitable and incorrigible, or built upon such

beliefs—is a claim that itself does not appear to be basic or built upon basic beliefs. This

is, indeed, problematic, but there is no reason to accept it as a necessary corollary of

---

[55]William G. Lycan, *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 50-71.

[56]The issue of analogy in theology is well beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is certainly an issue that impinges on theological method. For a sample of some of the issues, see Stephen W. Need, *Human Language and Knowledge in Light of Chalcedon*, Theology and Religion, vol. 187 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

critical realism.

As already mentioned, McGrath rightly contends that a rejection of foundationalism does not entail a rejection of realism. Nevertheless, there appears to be an additional way around Murphy's critique. McGrath tends to assume that there is one kind of foundationalism and that it has been discredited. If this is his assumption, however, it should be mentioned that some foundationalists have addressed the problems that led to the demise of classical foundationalism, and that while almost no one holds to a classical foundationalism, a revised, soft foundationalism is still a viable option according to many standards.[57] McGrath himself seems to accept a revised soft foundationalism.[58]

Finally, it seems that Murphy's assumptions about the inevitability of a shift to postmodernism are overstated. It is not enough to suggest that the conceptual changes suggested by postmodernism have begun a trend that will never reverse and that one should therefore stand on the side of the new trend. As stated above, Murphy contends that critical realism must be approached from the start with caution just because it is associated with modern thought, but it has been argued here that no critical realist would adopt the purely naïve form of modernism that she questions. Classical foundationalism

---

[57]See J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese, "The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Errickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 81-107.

[58]This observation has been made in Dennis L. Okholm, "The Uneasy Evangelical," in *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Engagement: A Dynamic Engagement*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 108.

may be problematic on certain levels, but suggesting that the inevitable alternative is constructivist postmodernism is unwarranted. The current status of postmodernism is debatable, and some have argued that the postmodern ethos will not be able to sustain itself.[59]

**The Explanatory Power of the Critical
Realist Theory of Stratified Reality**

The framework of stratified reality is yet another reason McGrath adopts critical realism. Admittedly, this element of critical realism in itself would not warrant the move, because someone could acknowledge the stratified nature of reality and yet deny the epistemological commitments of critical realism, holding to a thoroughly modernist epistemology concerning that reality, for example. For McGrath, however, critical realism's epistemology and a number of other positive features make it preferable to modern epistemologies. These features, coupled with the idea of reality's stratification, make critical realism his option of choice.

McGrath's has a threefold affinity for the notion that reality is stratified, especially as the concept is delineated by Roy Bhaskar. First, he sees it as a powerful way to explain the different methodologies in the sciences. For instance, the ways in which physicists investigate reality differ significantly from the approaches found in the biological sciences, or in chemistry, to cite two examples. The best explanation of

---

[59]James Parker III, "A Requiem for Postmodernism—Whither Now?" in *Reclaiming the Center*, 307-21.

methodological diversity, argues McGrath, is that reality is complex.[60] At this point one

of McGrath's arguments for the stratification of reality emerges. Following Bhaskar, he

thinks stratification is a deduction from the fact that scientific phenomena can be

explained on different levels: broadly speaking, theorists can offer different, but true,

explanations of various phenomena from various perspectives, namely physical,

chemical, and biological. More specifically, phenomena can be described in multiple

ways that are all true within a single discipline. For example, McGrath discusses four

representations (descriptions) of the reaction of sodium metal coming into contact with

hydrochloric acid, all four of which are accurate, commensurable, and indicative of

reality.[61] He takes these multiple explanations to be evidence of multiple layers of a

complex reality.[62]

A second reason McGrath is drawn to the notion of stratified reality is that it

provides him with an apologetic for why theological method may be legitimately

differentiated from scientific method. If reality is stratified, theology can rightly see

itself as interested in a particular layer of reality, just as each of the natural sciences

address distinct layers, and thus affirm its own methodology which is different from the

sciences. "Each intellectual discipline must adopt a methodology which is appropriate to,

---

[60]McGrath, *Reality*, 219-26.

[61]Ibid., 221.

[62]McGrath offers as additional evidence for the stratification of reality an
example of how a particular modern society can be explained in five ways that are all
true, five ways that indicate various strata of that society (ibid., 220). McGrath draws
this illustration from G. V. Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (New York:
International Publishers, 1969), 80.

and determined by, the ontology of its specific object."[63] This does not mean that there is no parallel between the methodologies of the natural sciences and theology; indeed they do share a common interest in what is, in reality, or the whole of what is. Theology, however, is primarily a response to a person, the Creator, while the natural sciences are rightly seen as a response to creation.

Finally, McGrath finds in Bhaskar's notion of stratified reality a powerful application to one of theology's own concepts, the concept of revelation. McGrath presents a strong basic case for reality's stratification, by which he means reality's complexity, a complexity which requires different methodologies to be adequately accessed and understood. At this point, where McGrath applies the critical realist theory of stratification to the theological concept of revelation, however, evangelicals are likely to have their strongest critiques for McGrath. As shown below, this issue raises an important question about the way McGrath utilizes critical realism. Before examining McGrath's application of stratification to the theological category of revelation, his attempt to erect a theological realism that can take an accredited place in the science-theology dialogue will first be examined. He makes this move toward theological realism in a twofold manner, beginning with a negative case against theological antirealism and then offering a positive case for theological realism by way of a revised natural theology.

McGrath's Case for Critical Theological Realism

As seen in chapter 2, critical realism is not necessarily a theological tool; it

---

[63] McGrath, *Reality*, 225.

finds itself amenable to a wide variety of projects and disciplines. McGrath is interested, however, in moving beyond a general critical realism to a critical theological realism.[64] In accomplishing this goal, he takes several approaches. First, he critiques various forms of theological anti-realism, correctly assuming that a weakened theological antirealism will only help his case for critical theological realism. In this respect, McGrath specifically addresses the theological antirealism of Ludwig Feuerbach, Don Cupitt, and the postliberal school of theology. Secondly, McGrath offers a positive case for theological realism—one that is not, however, a proof of God's existence in the tradition of classical apologetics (i.e., the cosmological, ontological, and teleological arguments). Instead, McGrath argues for a natural theology that starts with the assumption (or actual knowledge) of God's existence and then proceeds to an examination of how that knowledge is possible. This natural theology plays a large role in McGrath's plan for the science-theology dialogue. Criticisms that affect the former will therefore affect the latter. Before evaluating McGrath's positive case for theological critical realism and his plans for the science-theology dialogue, however, his criticism of theological antirealism will be evaluated.

------

[64]While McGrath is very interested in articulating and defending critical theological realism, it is only a part of his larger project, namely, a robust science of God. Brad Shipway is therefore correct to point out that, "For McGrath's purposes, the term 'theological critical realism' is perhaps a little 'small': rather than identifying aspects of theological thought that are critical realist, it would be more accurate to say that McGrath employs theological critical realism in the wider project of articulating a scientific

Against Theological Anti-Realism

McGrath adopts a critical theological realism that affirms the mind-independent existence of God while at the same time accepting the limitations of human knowledge of God. Part of his case involves a rejection of theological anti-realism. Nancey Murphy's rejection of critical realism, as analyzed earlier in this chapter, would seem to imply some antirealist alternative that would include theological antirealism, but this methodology is unacceptable for the Christian theology that McGrath seeks to develop. Specifically, it is problematic for McGrath because it does not allow theological language to refer to the reality called God. The scientific theology McGrath develops is not accepting of an enclosed and limited system of theological language that never reaches outside a particular community and thus never latches on, even in some incomplete way, to divine reality. Rather, his scientific theology "represents an *a posteriori* response to an existing reality, which it attempts to describe, represent and communicate."[65] In particular, "A scientific theology is a theology which accepts the existence of a creator and creation, even when humanity fails to recognize either. We do not bring such concepts into existence through our mental activity, but recognize and respond to a situation which already exists, independent of and prior to our reflections."[66]

In addition to rejecting the methodology of Murphy, McGrath also combats

---

theology." Brad Shipway, "The Theological Application of Bhaskar's Stratified Reality," *Journal of Critical Realism* 3 (2004), 193.

[65]McGrath, *Reality*, 279.

[66]Ibid., 248.

several more forms of anti-realism. The first of these forms is found in the work of

Ludwig Feuerbach (1818-83), whom McGrath credits as the founder of theological anti-

realism. Feuerbach concludes that human religions (and the gods of these religions) are

the obvious creations of longing human beings. "For Feuerbach, religious experience is

nothing more than an expression or an embodiment of the feeling that human beings have

of their own sensible nature. As such, they are liable mistakenly to objectify such

feelings in terms of an imaginary God."[67] In this view, God is a mere projection of the

inner human being.

Upon evaluation, it seems that Feuerbach offers little to support his assertion

of theological antirealism. Granted, he offers a possible explanation of human religion,

but a possible explanation is not necessarily probable, and Feuerbach cannot demonstrate

its probability. McGrath admits that Feuerbach's conclusion may make sense from

within his (Feuerbach's) framework: "Within a culture which is predisposed to regard

belief in God as odd, perhaps even insane, Feuerbach offers a reassuring theory which

purports to explain why anyone might develop such an idea. Yet its plausibility is

primarily cultural, rather than intellectual, in its derivation."[68] Thus, there is no reason to

---

[67]Alister E. McGrath, *Nature*, vol. 1 of *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 207. Feuerbach writes, "If feeling is the essential instrumentality or organ of religion, then God's nature is nothing other than an expression of the nature of feeling . . . The divine essence, which is comprehended by feeling, is actually nothing other than the essence of feeling, enraptured and delighted with itself—nothing but self-intoxicated, self-contented feeling," translated and quoted in ibid. A recent criticism of this line of reasoning in Feuerbach can be found in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[68]McGrath, *Nature*, 209.

necessitate accepting Feuerbach's claim that God is a human construction. Interestingly, McGrath concludes that religious realism and religious anti-realism are ultimately both "equally unverifiable and unfalsifiable" accounts and yet, the Christian answer, particularly the Christian reading of nature as creation and the theism this entails, "possesses a certain coherence."[69]

McGrath also appeals to the explanatory potential of Christianity as a reason to accept it over the conclusion of Feuerbach. He offers, for example, the correlation between mathematics and the natural world.[70] Mathematical thought, specifically in the areas of fractals and string theory, "appears to have an inbuilt propensity to describe the natural order."[71] This propensity is puzzling from within all but a few frameworks. In order to explain the descriptive power of mathematics, one must hold to "a platonic notion of 'recollection' or a Christian doctrine of creation."[72] McGrath adopts the latter.

Another antirealist whom McGrath addresses is former Anglican priest Don Cupitt.[73] Cupitt's antirealism is different from Feuerbach in that he emphasizes the value of religious faith despite its anti-realist nature. Denying the objective reality of God,

---

[69]Ibid.

[70]Ibid., 209-14.

[71]Ibid., 213.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Cupitt (born in 1934) became a deacon in 1959, and then a priest in 1960. By the mid 1990s he had stopped his priestly duties, and is currently no longer an active member of the church. Don Cupitt, "Don Cupitt: General Introduction" [on-line]; accessed 25 March 2011; available from http://www.doncupitt.com/doncupitt.html; Internet.

Cupitt goes on to argue that Christians [he includes himself in that category] need to take leave of God[74] and update their Christianity:

> In short, our religious beliefs and practices are an integral part of the evolving totality of culture, and must change with it. So we acknowledge that religion is human, historical and cultural all the way through. It could not have been otherwise. Nor does this matter, because if we remember our Bibles we'll recall that the religious system was never *intended* to be an end in itself. It is only a means: eventually it should make itself redundant, because the goal of the religious life is a spiritual state that is beyond all the symbols. . . . In the West, unfortunately, our religious outlook has usually been heavy, crude, gloomy and terroristic. The anti-realist point of view offers the prospect of Western religion's becoming a little more sophisticated than it has been in the past.[75]

McGrath's response to Cupitt focuses on his "manipulative rhetoric" that dismisses realism as outmoded while never providing a case to support the claim. Cupitt "seems to assume that since prestigious writers like Wittgenstein are anti-realists, everyone else ought to follow suit."[76] Like Feuerbach, Cupitt provides no case for his theological anti-realism; Feuerbach adopted theological anti-realism in a framework of religious skepticism, and Cupitt builds his within an assumed framework that fully embraces postmodern antirealism. However, neither Feuerbach nor Cupitt seems interested in defending the intellectual viability of their respective frameworks, each providing a merely possible explanation of the religions.

The third and final opponent of theological realism to be addressed is postliberalism. McGrath's critical realism brings him into disagreement with Lindbeck's

---

[74]Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM, 1981).

[75]Don Cupitt, "Anti-Realist Faith," in *Is God Real?*, ed. Joseph Runzo (New York: St. Martins, 1993), 54.

[76]McGrath, *Reality*, 253-54.

postliberal method. In particular, as chapter 3 presented, McGrath believes

postliberalism quarantines Christian doctrine, limiting it to the mere grammar of the

Christian community while saying nothing about God as he is apart from the community.

For McGrath, therefore, Lindbeck's method is marked by an implied theological

antirealism.

Some critics, however, have questioned McGrath's charge that postliberalism

is antirealist. Jeffrey Hensley, for example, has argued against the idea that

postliberalism entails antirealism.[77] He finds "no methodological constraints built into

postliberalism that would prevent it from being oriented around a realist metaphysics."[78]

This being the case, he contends that a rapprochement between evangelicals and

postliberals may exist.[79]

McGrath offers his scientific theology as a more viable method than other

major theological models, and that offering is based in part on postliberalism's failure to

adequately address reality. So, unless Hensley is rebutted, McGrath's case for a critical

theological realism is weakened. [80] Thus, the question remains: is Hensley's assessment

correct?

---

[77]Jeffrey Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists? Reexamining the Metaphysics of Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).

[78]Ibid., 71.

[79]Ibid.

[80]In a footnote, McGrath does point to Hensley as a "spirited" alternative reading of Lindbeck. McGrath, *Reality*, 105.

Hensley begins his case against attaching antirealist labels to postliberalism by distinguishing between two different forms of antirealism. To begin, "conceptual antirealists" define the world in terms of the various objects of our *experience.* The world or worlds that people experience "are not ready-made, but are constructed by the application of our concepts to our experience."[81] These antirealists should not be identified, however, with metaphysical idealists who deny objective, mind-independent entities. Conceptual antirealists like Hillary Putnam, for example, do not deny the existence of physical objects;[82] they accept a common man's realism about physical objects.[83] Nevertheless, "At the heart of the conceptual antirealist thesis is the notion that the concept of 'existence' must be understood as relative to our conceptual schemes."[84] Conceptual antirealists thus do not deny the existence of physical objects but they do argue that our concepts are mere human schematizations of reality.

The other form of antirealism that Hensly points out is "alethic antirealism." This form claims "that truth is likewise relative to conceptual schemes."[85] Hensley explains further,

---

[81]Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists," 72-73.

[82]Conceptual antirealist Hilary Putnam argues, "Do fields exist as physically real things? Yes, fields really exist; relative to one scheme for describing and explaining physical phenomena." Hilary Putnam, *Realism and Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 230, quoted in Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists," 73.

[83]Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists," 73.

[84]Ibid.

[85] Ibid., 74.

We cannot as humans crawl out of our conceptual skins, as it were, but are always construing the world relative to the ways in which we represent it. What we take to be true (or false for that matter) will never be concept-free but will always depend on conceptual interpretations of our experience. To put it another way, truth is radically *epistemic*, and thus we should think of truth as a relationship of sentences or beliefs themselves, rather than in the realist sense as a relationship of sentences or beliefs to something external to the mind, such as a mind-independent world. If truth is relative to conceptual scheme, then, according to alethic antirealism, for a sentence to be true means merely that humans have warrant to believe it. As Richard Rorty, another prominent antirealist thinker, succinctly puts it, truth is 'shaped rather than found.'[86]

Hensley argues that neither of these two antirealist labels is to be identified with postliberal method. He approaches this conclusion by taking the most (seemingly) antirealist statement from Lindbeck and assessing whether it requires antirealism. Lindbeck writes, "For those who are steeped in them [their own tradition's canonical writings], no world is more real than the ones they create. A scriptural world is thus able to absorb the universe. It supplies the interpretive framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality."[87] Is this not some form of constructive anti-realism? "In other words, is the *existence* of the extrascriptural world as kinds and particulars relative to the intratextual framework of Scripture?"[88] Hensley contends that Lindbeck is not arguing for such relativism; rather, he argues that kinds and particulars depend on Scripture for their meaning, not for their existence. In Hensley's view, Lindbeck is only speaking loosely when he says the world most real to a person is the one

---

[86] Ibid.

[87] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 117.

[88] Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists," 76.

155

formed in relation to his tradition's scriptures. People do not create worlds as in

idealism. Worlds are in existence prior to human thoughts about them, but the particular

framework a person finds himself in does have a profound impact on his understanding of

the world. Whether it is Augustine addressing topics in Plato's corpus, or Aquinas

writing about Aristotle, or Schleiermacher relating to German romantic idealism, "The

way they described extrascriptural realities and experience, so it can be argued, was

shaped by biblical categories much more than was warranted by their formal

methodologies."[89]

Hensley's case seems fairly strong, but McGrath's ultimate concern might still

be well-founded. Perhaps postliberalism is not necessarily or even overtly antirealist.[90]

Yet, even if one cannot speak in terms as strong as "antirealist" when describing

postliberalism, it does seem as if its methodological constraints quarantine it from

communities other than its own. A quick perusal of statements from Lindbeck leads one

to believe that even if postliberalism is not necessarily antirealist, it does not relate

Christianity's universal message any better than it would if it were antirealist. Lindbeck

limits the scope of the authority of Christian doctrine to the Christian community;

therefore, "There can be no single best theology (because what is best depends in part on

---

[89]Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 117.

[90]Lindbeck does speak of "ultimate reality" and leaves open the possibility
that one religion is "categorically and unsurpassably true" (ibid., 52). Like a surpassingly
great map, the true religion "is capable of being rightly utilized, of guiding thought,
passions, and action in a way that corresponds to ultimate reality, and of thus being
ontologically (and 'propositionally') true, but it is not always and perhaps not even
usually so employed"(ibid.).

156

the historical context)."[91] Yet, McGrath would contend that the very message of

Christianity claims universal authority; the Jesus of Christianity makes claims upon the

world and not merely upon his disciples. Lindbeck's project, therefore, does not offer a

complete picture. It is undoubtedly more helpful to religious dialogue than experiential-

expressivist models that assume one common core experience, but its answer to the

question of religious diversity, to the sometimes incompatible claims of various religions,

is ultimately unsatisfactory. In postliberalism a communal set of rules is authoritative for

that community. Why the content of Christianity is valid for those outside the

Christianity is nevertheless left unclear. This is especially the case when examining the

core of Christianity, namely, the gospel message and Jesus' call to proclaim it. Lindbeck

leaves open the possibility that certain Christian beliefs may aid those outside the faith to

be better within their own faith (or non-faith), but he pushes the evangelical pursuit of the

lost to the realm of insignificance. Because each community must play by its own rules,

the task of Christians is not to convert those within other communities to a particular

Christian community, but "to encourage Marxists to be better Marxists, Jews and

Muslims to become better Jews and Muslims, and Buddhists to become better Buddhists

(although admittedly their notion of what a 'better Marxist,' etc. is will be influenced by

Christian norms)."[92]

In sum, even if postliberalism is not necessarily antirealist, McGrath has

---

[91]Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 12.

[92]Ibid., 54.

grounds to reject postliberal methodology.[93] A methodology need not be blatantly or

even necessarily antirealist in order to be irrelevant to the wider world. Therefore, their

reluctance to connect theology to reality opens postliberals up to a host of criticism.[94]

**McGrath's Positive Case for Critical Theological
Realism: Natural Theology**

Later in this chapter, McGrath's application of critical realism to the

theological concept of revelation will be evaluated. His first, and perhaps foremost,

application of critical realism comes, however, in his development of a revised natural

theology. McGrath's successful defense of scientific realism, and the helpful

qualifications made by critical realism, do not add up to a case for critical theological

realism. This is because, as Andrew Moore put it, "being an anti-realist about one aspect

of reality is not prima facie inconsistent with being realist about other aspects of

---

[93]Robert Greer criticizes McGrath for focusing on Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine* to the exclusion of his earlier and later work, which for Greer presents a fuller and more balanced view of Lindbeck as a "Middle-distance realist" rather than an anti-realist. Still, Greer provides an unsatisfactory response to McGrath's concern about postliberalism's reluctance to speak a universal Gospel message to those outside the Christian community. Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 154-56.

[94] Even though postliberals distance themselves from ontological questions in favor of communal constructions, it could be argued that they must admit something of a correspondence theory of truth when it comes to the intercommunal beliefs of some particular group. Specifically, postliberals describe the beliefs of Christian communities, but in doing so they assume that their descriptions correspond to the community they are describing. If words can grasp, in part, the belief system of some community, could they not also describe (partially) other aspects of reality, including God?

reality."[95] McGrath has offered a compelling case that scientific realism is rational, yet

scientific realism or even a critical scientific realism does not entail a critical theological

realism. For one reviewer this lack of transference from scientific realism to theological

realism is a fact that detracts from McGrath's argument:

> I was not convinced by the move McGrath makes from an argument in favour of scientific realism to the defence of a form of theological realism. There is an enormous gulf between the sciences and theologies as regards their success, whether measured by instrumental and experimental efficacy or by intellectual coherence, which is not seriously addressed here. Furthermore, for a relative outsider, arguments about a reality behind the phenomena studied by the natural sciences may well convince him about the un-tenability of non-realism in the ontological sense (whatever the fate of realism in the epistemological, referential kind), whereas an ontological commitment is much harder to sustain for theological claims. Avoiding engagement with these issues by working within a theological tradition with a strong concept of revelation makes the argument much easier, but also far more insular.[96]

While it is true that an argument for scientific realism does not easily transfer to an

argument for theological realism, it appears that McGrath recognizes this issue and offers

a positive case for critical theological realism. Consequently, this section will focus on

McGrath's positive case for adopting critical theological realism, specifically, in the form

of his restructured natural theology.

McGrath does not argue for theological realism, the view that God is a distinct

ontological reality who has no dependence on human cognition for his existence, on the

---

[95]Andrew Moore, *Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar, and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2. Moore points out that Michael Dummett holds this view (ibid., 2). See Michael Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (London: Duckworth, 1991), 16.

[96]Willem B. Dress, review of *Reality*, by Alister E. McGrath, *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), sec. 3. [journal on-line], accessed 31 January 2011; available from http://www.arsdisputandi.org; Internet.

basis of any classical argument for the existence of God. Rather, he appeals to various

elements in the works of Karl Barth as a better response to the issue of theological

knowledge.[97] As seen in chapter 3, McGrath adopts Barth's position that theology does

not start with ruminations about what can be known of God, but with the revelation of

God. God alone makes God known, and this revelation is prior to any human

epistemological formulation. Describing his own methodology, McGrath writes, "A

scientific theology takes the view that theological reflection paradoxically begins with an

actual knowledge of God, and in light of this, proceeds to enquire as to how this

knowledge is possible."[98]

McGrath appears to have good reason to adopt this line of thought from Barth.

If Christian theism is true it necessarily follows that the created can only know the

Creator by his will. As Erickson puts it, "Because humans are finite and God is infinite,

if they are to know God it must come about by God's manifestation of himself."[99]

The idea that revelation logically precedes knowledge of the Revealer has been

around at least since the middle of the fourth century when Saint Hillary of Poitiers

penned his *De Trinitate*. In that work, Hillary contended that God gives "testimony

concerning himself."[100] Hillary encouraged his reader to "concede to God the knowledge

---

[97]McGrath, *Reality*, 257-68.

[98]Ibid., 269.

[99]Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 178.

[100]Saint Hilary of Poitiers *The Trinity* 1.18, trans. Stephen McKenna, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 25 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954), 18.

about himself," and to "humbly submit to His words with reverent awe. For He is a

competent witness for Himself *who is not known except by himself*."[101] Drawing on

Hilary, Calvin later wrote: "Let us then willingly leave to God the knowledge of himself.

For, as Hilary says, he is the one fit witness to himself, and is not known except through

himself. But we shall be 'leaving it to him' if we conceive him to be as he reveals

himself to us, without inquiring about him elsewhere than from his Word."[102] As

Torrance comments,

> It was in strict adherence to this fundamental principle that Calvin set out his
> doctrine of the Trinity in the *Institute* [*sic*]. While God is infinitely exalted above
> what we can conceive of him by ourselves, he nevertheless makes himself known to
> us through a two-fold movement of revelation in which he lifts us above the world
> and descends to us far beneath his own exaltedness, lisping to us, as it were, in ways
> of speaking which we can grasp but which are not transparent expressions of what
> God is like so much as accommodations of this knowledge to the slightness of our
> minds.[103]

God accommodates himself so that creatures may know him; otherwise, there would be

too great a barrier between God's transcendence and human earthiness. This

accommodation is not so radical, however, that there is no true knowledge of God

himself.[104]

---

[101]Ibid. Emphasis added.

[102]John Calvin *Institutio Christianae religionis* 1.13.21, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, under the title *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 146.

[103]Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 43. Cf. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh and New York: T&T Clark, 1996), 11.

[104]Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 37-38.

While adopting the basic insight from Barth that revelation precedes knowledge of God, McGrath nevertheless objects to Barth's unqualified rejection of natural theology and adopts a revised natural theology. As described in chapter 3, this natural theology assumes the priority of revelation as in Barth, but contends that a natural theology that gives priority to revelation and that comes from *within* a revealed Christian tradition is possible. "Natural theology cannot become a totally autonomous discipline, independent of revelation, in that it depends on the revealed insight that God is creator of the natural order."[105] Hence, when nature is construed as the work of the triune God, as the "creation," a fact that is revealed, then natural theology may commence.

Several critiques of McGrath's natural theology present themselves. First, McGrath's natural theology starts with an assumed knowledge of God. This knowledge is rooted in divine revelation to which Scripture bears record, so there is also an assumption at the start of McGrath's natural theology about Scripture.[106] Scripture plays the magisterial and foundational role in theology,[107] yet this plan to start natural theology with assumptions about Scripture comes up against several challenges, especially when trying to engage those outside the Christian tradition and when trying to make a case for

---

[105] McGrath, *Nature*, 296.

[106] As seen in chap. 3, McGrath regards Scripture as the "supreme norm of evangelical thought." Alister McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method: The State of the Art," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 32.

[107] "Theology must be nourished and governed at all points by Holy Scripture." McGrath, *Science of God*, 13. So far in his scientific theology, McGrath has not interacted significantly with the actual text of Scripture. But its major themes certainly stand in the background.

162

dialogue between theology and the natural sciences. Asking Christians to engage in this

kind of natural theology would meet with little resistance, though some may likely prefer

to call it something other than natural theology, given the associations of the term with

the Enlightenment. Yet, to ask non-Christians or non-theists to grant these

presuppositions is not likely to meet with success apart from prolonged apologetic

interaction.

One might appeal to those outside Christianity to accept the veracity of the

Bible based on its self-attestation, namely its claim to be the word of God.[108]

---

[108]The claim that the Scripture bears witness to its own divine origin is made
on several bases. First, some of the New Testament authors make statements about the
Old Testament. These are claims about part of the Christian canon from within the
canon. The most quoted of these references are 2 Pet 1:19-21 and 2 Tim 3:16. Peter
teaches that the origin of Old Testament Scripture was not man, but God. These men
wrote as they were "moved by the Holy Spirit," thus, "no prophecy was ever made by an
act of human will" (v. 21). In 2 Timothy, Paul contends that the γραφὴ, the actual written
word, not the writers, is the active product of God.

Second, the preaching of the early church exemplifies this attitude toward the
Old Testament. Acts 1:16 records Peter saying, **"**Brethren, the Scripture had to be
fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who
became a guide to those who arrested Jesus." Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 are then quoted by
Peter regarding the fate of Judas. He clearly claims that God spoke by the mouth of
David. By recording Peter's claim, Luke has given a voice to the book of Acts. That
voice claims authority for the Old Testament.

Third, Jesus makes claims which assume the authority of the Old Testament
writings. His message in John 10:35 is that "the scripture cannot be broken."
Furthermore, he asks in many places (e.g. Matt 19:4, Luke 6:3), "Have you not read . . .?"
By including such statements from Jesus in their writings, the evangelists also sound a
claim from within the canon (the Gospels) about the canon (the Old Testament).

Fourth, New Testament authors extend their claims beyond the Old Testament
to their own writings. One well-known example of this is 2 Pet 3:16 where Peter equates
Paul's letters with Scripture. He says that some twist Paul's writings "as they do also the
rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction." The apostles were aware that they were
not writing solely upon their own initiative; God was at work in them (also see 1 Thess
4:2).

163

Specifically, it may be granted that the Bible's claims about itself sometimes lead people to trust in its authority and, consequently, to faith in the Christ, and many theologians rightly attribute this acceptance to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Still, there will be an intellectual barrier for some, and a public theology like the one McGrath seeks to develop will not thrive without an effort to demonstrate why one should begin with the assumptions of God, revelation, and the related assumption of the veracity of the Bible, as McGrath's natural theology seems to require.

Many will see this appeal to start with the assumption of God as fideistic.[109] Others who detect within McGrath a presupposition of Scripture will want to know why he presupposes Christian Scripture rather than some other religious text. Furthermore, many will question the self-referential witness of the Bible, which McGrath seems to

---

Finally, the Old Testament is filled with phrases such as "The Lord said," "The Lord spoke," "The word of the Lord came unto me," and so on. These occur in excess of 3800 times. In light of these testimonies, and of the testimonies of Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament, a single voice emerges from the Bible. The cumulative effect of the individual biblical voices is a self-referential voice which claims to be the word of God.

For examples of this argument, see Alan M. Stibbs, "The Witness of Scripture to Its Inspiration," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F.H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958). Norman Geisler and William E. Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 27-49. Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, revised by Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 48-49. James M. Grier, Jr., "The Apologetic Value of the Self-Witness of Scripture," *Grace Theological Journal* 1 (1980): 71-76. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 226-29. Wayne Grudem, "Scripture's Self Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture," in Scripture and Truth, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

[109]William J. Abraham, "Revelation and Natural Theology," in *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Engagement: A Dynamic Engagement*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

assume, as circular and therefore not likely to have much affect outside the community of those who already have faith.[110]

McGrath's attempt to construct a natural theology that assumes Scripture, and more broadly, divine revelation, takes the Bible's claim to be representative of (or equal to) God's word at face value. Nevertheless, while it may be possible to construct a natural theology that incorporates the content of divine revelation from early on, questions regarding the veracity of the Bible's self-witness need to be answered. A critical theological realism is interested in connecting doctrine with reality, thus a case that revelation reflects reality and is indeed revelation, and not a human construct, needs to be made. Less than such an attempt will raise, once again, charges of a veiled fideism.

Some have attempted to answer the problem of circularity by pointing out that the Bible must appeal to itself if it is indeed the highest authority, for there is no greater court of appeal. In other words, supposing that the Bible is God's word, to what greater source of justification could it appeal other than itself? This is the point of Wayne Grudem, who contends that "All arguments for an absolute authority must ultimately appeal to that authority for proof: otherwise the authority would not be an absolute or highest authority."[111] Similarly, Erickson states the dilemma for anything claiming ultimate authority: "Either it bases its starting point upon itself, in which case it is guilty

---

[110]One reference to this circularity who predates McGrath's project is Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 42.

[111]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 78-79.

of circularity, or it bases itself upon some foundation other than that upon which it bases all its other articles, in which case it is guilty of inconsistency."[112] If the Bible is God's word, then its testimony must be accepted. This is, however, a big "if" for those outside the Christian community. Many will not, therefore, accept the *a priori* claim that the Bible is God's word, because these answers leave the problem of religious diversity unanswered. Could not other books, incompatible with the Bible, in principle make this circular claim and argue in the same fashion for their own veracity? Grier recognizes this problem: "The world is full of competing religions, all of which claim authority for their position. How does one go about testing claims to religious authority for truth value?"[113]

McGrath's critical realism acknowledges the effect one's framework has on one's interpretation of reality, but it cannot address the issue of religious diversity in itself. It cannot indicate which framework is the best representation of reality. This same inability affects McGrath's modified natural theology, which accepts the critical realist claim that there is no neutral point from which to argue for a Christian framework, and asks those outside the framework of Christianity to step in and try out the Christian framework. This approach is not likely to gain many adherents in the scientific community. More needs to be offered by way of critical defense of Christianity and a positive case for the Christian worldview. Christianity has always had more to offer in the arena of competing claims to authority than this circular appeal to the Bible. While

---

[112]Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 226.

[113]Grier, "Apologetical Value," 72.

some traditions do not value epistemological certainty, the majority of Western thinkers see the importance of having justification for their beliefs; people generally believe that it is better to have correct beliefs about the world than incorrect ones. In this framework, it would be intellectually irresponsible to merely assume a particular set of religious knowledge claims, as McGrath seems to do in his natural theology.

In no way should one deny that the Spirit testifies (2 Cor 2: 4-11) to the existence of God's revelation, existence, and so on in the life of the believer.[114] This claim about the internal testimony will not suffice, however, in theological and philosophical interaction with other traditions, especially revealed religions such as Islam. A larger case can be made for Christianity, one that McGrath's critical theological realism leaves untouched, and while those who are already in the faith may not need it and are indeed rational in their belief without that case, Christians must not refrain from presenting Christianity's strengths to those who are befuddled by competing claims to authority.

A second critique of McGrath's natural theology focuses on the tension between two aspects of his view on human rationality. As a critical realist, McGrath denies that it is possible to access reality from a neutral perspective. This is largely related to his belief that the Enlightenment view of a universal human rationality is a failure. Part of the reason McGrath rejects classical natural theology is because it assumes this faulty Enlightenment view. The common view of human rationality in the

---

[114]R.C. Sproul, "The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 337-54.

Enlightenment was that there is a universal human reason, "one single, universal set of criteria by which the epistemic status of all beliefs, mediate or immediate, may be judged."[115] For McGrath, however, universal human reason is a fiction: "People possessed and possess contested and at times incommensurable notions of both what is 'rational', 'true,' and 'right,' and how those qualities might be justified."[116] Nevertheless, while he denies the existence of a universal rationality, he also holds that God created people with a rationality common to and constitutive of all humans, a rationality that infuses the created order, a rationality that all humans share and by which they may detect the rationality of the created order. He specifically says, "That human beings have been remarkably successful in investigating and grasping something of the structure and workings of the world is beyond dispute."[117] The rationality of the world, a rationality passed on from the Creator to the creation, is "accessible to human beings."[118] Also, McGrath quotes Polkinghorne approvingly with respect to this capacity humans have for seeing the order of the creation. Polkinghorne argues, "If the deep-seated congruence of the rationality present in our minds with the rationality present in the world is to find true explanation, it must surely lie in some more profound reason which is the ground of both. Such a reason would be provided by the Rationality of the

---

[115]McGrath, *Reality*, 57.

[116]Ibid.

[117]McGrath, *Nature*, 197.

[118]Ibid.

Creator."[119] Human beings do share in the rationality of the Creator, having been created in the image of God. "Humanity thus finds itself in an ambivalent position within creation, being at one and the same time part of that creation yet also bearing a particular and significant relationship with the creator which has not been granted to the remainder of the created order."[120] While it may not be the whole of what it means to be created in the image of God, the idea that human rationality is created by God and in some way related to God's own rationality is an important point in McGrath's scientific theology. There is a "fundamental congruence—but not identity—of the divine rationality on the one hand, and that found within creation, including humanity itself."[121]

By now the tension in McGrath's view should be evident. If human beings share in the divine rationality (i.e., if there is a "fundamental congruence" between the two) why is a universal rationality ruled out? It seems, therefore, that McGrath is at once denying and affirming a common human rationality, a position that critical evangelical thinkers will want McGrath to clarify as they continue to chart the course of his work.

Finally, given the first two criticisms, McGrath's critical realist approach to natural theology may not serve the theology-science dialogue in the way he hopes. This is not to say that McGrath offers nothing to foster the dialogue. Several insights of critical realism—namely, that reality is what it is apart from human observation,

---

[119]John Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation*: *The Search for Meaning* (London: SPCK, 1988), 22, quoted in McGrath, *Nature*, 197.

[120]McGrath, *Nature*, 197.

[121]Ibid., 204.

stratified, marked by regularity, and accessed from within a limited human framework—

are shared by theology and science as they are generally practiced. In sharing these

carefully defended insights from critical realism, dialogue between the sciences and

theology will be all the better—a fundamental congruence exists in their attitude toward

reality and how it is to be investigated. McGrath's proposal for relating science and

theology is nevertheless too optimistic in several respects. It will be remembered that he

views natural theology as something of a "conceptual meeting place for Christian

theology and the sciences;"[122] Yet, his natural theology essentially asks science to admit

the Christian framework. As stated earlier, the evidence for scientific realism arises from

observations of science's predictive successes. To make the same realist claim for

theology, however, involves a great deal more controversy. Theologians cannot merely

assert that they are engaging reality and gain the automatic agreement of the wider

intellectual community, yet McGrath's approach to natural theology involves him in such

an assertion.

Given the biblical picture of the fallen state of man, and the nature of

salvation and theological "seeing," McGrath's assertion will not likely be accepted. He is

asking natural scientists to grant the Christian framework and see whether the view

answers questions that science has so far not been able to answer, questions about the

orderliness of nature, for example. Granted, the Christian answer has powerful

explanatory power for Christians; there is a beauty to the notion that the creation bears

---

[122]Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 20.

the rationality of its creator, the logos, and that creation is therefore orderly, just as

science has observed. Nevertheless, scientists who are committed to reductionistic

naturalism (i.e., the view that nature is all there is) simply do not have the capacity to see

that beauty. Their methodology rules out, from the start, non-natural explanations of

order. Christianity's story is no more to them than a logically possible explanation, but

given widespread commitment to naturalism in the natural sciences, many scientists

would rather reserve the right to some future "scientific" explanation of the order in the

universe than invoke God as an explanation.

McGrath's Application of Critical Realism
to the Theological Concept of Revelation

As noted in chapter 3 McGrath applies the concept of stratification to the

theological category of revelation. It will be remembered that McGrath defines

revelation as "first and foremost a divine act."[123] The revelational acts of God in history

give rise to a

> complex aggregate of texts, ideas, images, values, communities and events, which
> may be described as 'revelation' in the developed sense of the term, which were
> brought into existence, or given a new depth of meaning, as a result of the original
> revelatory events which lie behind them, and which are handed on and transmitted
> through history. These are all affirmed to be integral yet distinct aspects of the same
> fundamental notion, whose interconnectedness may be explored and confirmed by
> historical and theological analysis.[124]

As noted earlier, McGrath argues that the acts of God in history serve together as a causal

force that results in a stratified reality called revelation. The totality of the respective

---

[123]McGrath, *Science of God*, 209.

[124]McGrath, *Theory*, 146.

171

layers constitutes "revelation," and revelation is much more than any single layer.[125]

Regarding the layers of revelation, McGrath specifically mentions eight: (1) the canonical

Scriptures of the Christian tradition, (2) patterns of worship, (3) ideas, (4) communities,

(5) institutional structures such as the episcopacy, (6) images, (7) distinctive Christian

vocabulary, and 8) religious experience.[126]

**General Criticisms of McGrath's
Layers of Revelation**

By describing revelation in this manner, McGrath has opened himself up to a

twofold criticism. First of all, there is an inherent and, some may argue, irresolvable

tension between McGrath's own statements about the Bible as revelation, on the one

hand, and his statements about the eightfold stratification of revelation, on the other.[127]

On the one hand, he suggests that Christian Scripture is itself *not* to be identified with

revelation, specifically suggesting that "revelation is not something we currently

experience; rather, we now encounter its aftermath, its indentation on the historical

process."[128] Revelation "is an *act* of God rather than a permanent state of

---

[125]Ibid.

[126]Ibid., 147-48.

[127]Dew argues that the tension is not irresolvable but does need clarification. He writes, "McGrath is not denying the Bible as revelation. Rather, he is simply showing how this doctrine can be used to explain the Christian tradition itself. Nevertheless, McGrath's ST could be strengthened by giving further clarification on this issue within the course of *A Scientific Theology* and *The Science of God*." Dew, "Science as the *Ancilla Theologiae*," 161-62.

[128]McGrath, *Theory*, 151.

'revealedness,'" and each of God's acts "give rise to revelational interpretations of these acts, which we find recorded in Scripture."[129] The canonical Scriptures bear witness to God's revelatory acts in history and offer "narrated interpretations of their significance."[130] Rather than being identified with the Word of God, Scripture is, as "the creation of the church, intended to preserve both the foundational narratives of the Christian faith and their correct interpretation."[131] This latter statement is especially important to the claim that McGrath, at least in some areas of his corpus, distances the Bible from revelation. He claims the Bible is a record of revelation, a creation of the church, but not a revelation of God. The claim that Scripture is "a creation of the church" stands in stark contrast to the claim that the church discovered the canon (i.e. recognized the inspiration of certain writings) rather than created it. To say the former, that the church discovered the canon, is to root canonicity in inspiration rather than in the age of biblical books, the usefulness of the books, or some other factor external to the writings themselves.[132]

These statements from McGrath reflect an understanding of Scripture that does not accord with Scripture's understanding of itself,[133] but it also seems to differ with

---

[129]McGrath, *The Science of God*, 210.

[130]McGrath, *Theory*, 146.

[131]McGrath, *The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 217.

[132]Norman Geisler and William Nix offer a helpful introduction to these matters. Geisler and Nix, *From God to Us*, 62-73.

[133]See note 108 above for evidence of this claim.

what McGrath himself says in other places. McGrath's affirmation of inerrancy and his acceptance of Scripture as foundational to theology have already been mentioned, but McGrath also identifies Scripture directly with the oracles (word) of God and as revelatory. As an example of the latter, he writes, "The New Testament clearly presupposes that revelation has taken place, and that what has been entrusted to the community of faith represents a 'deposit (παραθήκη) which results from this revelation, and which may in itself legitimately be regarded as revelatory (1 Timothy 6:20; cf. 2 Timothy 1:12-14)."[134]

To summarize, McGrath speaks about the nature of the Bible in two different manners that are in tension. One may try to guess as to how he might fit the two views together into a harmonious whole, but McGrath has left the task undone. Indeed, he may have reason to believe there is no tension between the various things he avers about the Bible's revealatory status. If so, this is likely due (perhaps unknowingly) to suppressed steps in his argument or hidden assumptions in his description of Scripture, assumptions that are perhaps obvious and clear to McGrath, but ones that need to be elucidated for his readers, especially as he begins to apply his methodology to the construction of his own theology.

The second criticism of McGrath's application of stratified reality to revelation has to do with the specific identifications he gives the respective layers. He

---

[134]McGrath, *Theory*, 144. Regarding the Scripture as the very oracles of God he writes, "Revelation concerns the *oracles* of God, the *acts* of God, and the *person and presence* of God ." Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 107. His emphasis.

calls Scripture a layer of revelation, which would make sense given his more positive statements about the revelatory status of the biblical text. However, a number of other things he calls layers of revelation—patterns of worship, communities, institutional structures of the church, images, and Christian vocabulary— do not obviously belong in this category, and he offers no argument for why they should be included. Provided these items are found in Scripture or are valid deductions from Scripture, one could anticipate an argument for the revelatory status of certain patterns of worship, elements of Christian vocabulary such as the term Trinity, or certain images such as the cross, but McGrath is almost completely silent on these issues.

A development of this idea of revelation as a reality that is stratified is therefore an obvious place where McGrath's application of critical realism needs to be developed. He basically lists the eight strata of revelation with a brief description of each and never revisits them. One exception to this observation is his claim that religious experience is a stratum of revelation, a claim he revisits later.[135] McGrath's return to the concept of religious experience provides a good opportunity to evaluate at least one application of stratification to revelation, one more in addition to his identification of biblical texts as a stratum. It is to this task this chapter now turns.

Another Layer of Revelation?
Religious Experience

While McGrath is careful not to assign too much authority to religious

---

[135]McGrath, *Theory*, 162-65.

experience, he does accept it as a genuine source of knowledge of God.[136] In claiming

that religious experience is a stratum of revelation, he is contending that there is

something to be learned (from God) about the Christian faith from religious experience.

While some evangelicals may recoil at this claim, choosing instead to focus solely on the

Bible as a source of knowledge about God, it bears mentioning that the criterion of

experience is closely related to the Christian claim to know truth through revelation from

God in the Bible.[137] In other words, experience and revelation are not mutually exclusive

when it comes to Christian claims to knowledge. Specifically, the production of the

biblical text is itself rooted in the religious experience of its authors. "God intentionally

disclosed himself in appearances and utterances with the primary scope of making known

a salvation that was not discoverable by natural and normal human cognitive

procedures."[138] It is inconceivable how "appearances" and "utterances" might come to

someone other than through his or her experience. Isaiah, for example, "*heard* the voice

of the Lord, asking, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?'" before he wrote those

---

[136]For McGrath, scientific theology is in part defensible because it has the capacity to explain religious experience, and yet its explanatory power is not limited to the various phenomena of religious experience. He writes, "While some theologians argue that the explanatory aspects of Christian theology are limited to religious experience or the specifics of the Christian tradition, a scientific theology—with its emphasis upon a unitary yet stratified reality—will insist that its explanatory competence extends to every aspect of reality." McGrath, *Theory*, 193.

[137]Granted, not all Christians equate the written Scripture with revelation. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation, however, to deal with other conceptions of the link between the Bible and revelation.

[138]Sebastian Rehnman, "A Realist Conception of Revelation," in *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the Nature of Scripture*, ed. Paul Helm and Carl R. Truman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 266.

words down (Isa 6:8). However one describes it, the authors of Scripture had religious

experiences as, or before, they wrote. Ronald Nash concurs, "Even the few Christians

I've met who appear sometimes to disdain the religious experiences (or at least the more

extreme religious experiences) of others and claim that their faith is not grounded on

experience but on God's revelation in Scripture overlook an important point. The

revealed texts that function properly as an authority for their beliefs and conduct are

products of the religious *experiences* of the inspired human authors who penned them."[139]

In keeping with critical realism's claim that ontology determines epistemology,

McGrath argues that each of the eight strata of revelation "requires investigation and

explanation, on the basis of its own distinct identity and characteristics."[140] He chooses

the stratum of religious experience to demonstrate how this might be done. Noting the

already "well-established pattern within the Christian theological tradition of arguing

from a present effect to a revelational cause," [141] McGrath specifically mentions

Schleiermacher's argument from the present effect of religious experience back to its

historical (and revelational) cause.

Schleiermacher argues that the origins of this feeling are to be located in the impact

---

[139]Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 143. Similarly, Grahame Miles argues that "religious experience" and "revelation" can actually refer to the same event. "When one talks about Scripture as 'revelation,' then that refers to digested and edited material from the experiences of those who received or discovered the original insights." Grahame Miles, *Science and Religious Experience: Are They Similar Forms of Knowledge?* (Portland, OR, and Eastbourne, UK: Sussex, 2007), 348.

[140]McGrath, *Theory*, 162.

[141]Ibid.

of Jesus of Nazareth upon the collective consciousness of the Christian community. (Note, incidentally, that Schleiermacher avoids a purely individualistic approach to such feelings; the feelings in question are the common property and heritage of the Christian church.) Schleiermacher thus holds that a specific Christology is to be inferred from the present impact of Jesus of Nazareth upon believers within the church, arguing back from the observed effect in the present experience of believers to it sufficient cause in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.[142]

McGrath distances himself from the Christology of Schleiermacher, some of the details of which he rejects. "The important thing," he underscores, "is to note the theological trajectory followed by Schleiermacher, which begins with a specific stratum of reality, as currently experienced within the life of the church, and proceed to trace it back to its cause."[143] The faults in Schleiermacher's resulting theology are not to be blamed on this pattern of reasoning from present effects to original revealatory causes, but on "Schleiermacher's single-leveled approach to Christian experience, which fails to take into account the multi-leveled character of the Christian faith."[144] McGrath goes on to say that, "Given the multi-leveled nature of the present day Christian experience, a correspondingly stratified notion of revelation is required to account for it."[145] Here we see McGrath applying stratification to one of the layers, namely religious experience, of an already stratified revelation. In other words, additional layers exist within at least some of the primary layers of revelation. He does not suggest specifically what the other layers of religious experience might be or how they differ from the level that

---

[142]Ibid.,162-63

[143]Ibid., 163.

[144]Ibid., 164.

[145]Ibid.

178

Schleiermacher addressed. Consequently, this is an area that one would hope receives

further argumentation and explanation in McGrath's future work. He concludes the

matter by suggesting that this process of reasoning backward to original revelatory causes

can be applied to each of the eight strata of revelation, but he gives no further explanation

or example. He thinks "the fundamental impetus" to each of the present day levels of

revelation "is the words and deeds of God in history, culminating in the death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ."[146] "It is this," he writes, "which has impacted upon history,

and resulted in what is now accessible to our investigation."[147]

Not only does McGrath's understanding of the various types of religious

experience, and the type of investigation each requires, need much more development

and explanation, but additionally he has left the more fundamental question of the basic

epistemic status of religious experience significantly underdeveloped. He does not offer

his readers, many of whom he takes to be dialogue partners outside of the Christian

tradition, reasons for believing they can have some level of confidence that religious

experience is a legitimate stratum of reality, as worthy of investigation as the various

strata of the physical, observable world.   Peterson frames the issue as follows:

> Of course, a religious experience can be the source of religious insight. Both Isaiah
> and Augustine claimed that their experiences of God gave them understanding both
> about the nature of God and about their own sinfulness. But one can have religious
> insight without either experiencing God or believing that God exists, whereas to
> have a religious experience requires that God or some transcendent reality either be

---

[146]Ibid. This language again raises questions about McGrath's view of the
revelatory status of the written text of the New Testament, which obviously postdates the
culminating event of the cross and resurrection.

[147]Ibid.

179

the object of the experience or taken to be such.[148]

Experiences in which people believe that they have experienced God have been explained in a number of different ways, some of them quite skeptical. *That* people have what they believe to be experiences of God can hardly be denied. Whether they have *actually* experienced God is an entirely different matter. Thus, the crucial question in modern philosophical discussions of this phenomenon concerns the evidential value of religious experience. For example, Charles Taliaferro states the vital place religious experience occupies in the current discussion between theists and nontheists:

> A defense of the intelligibility and coherence of religious experience is as important to many theists as a critique of religious experience is for nonreligious naturalists. Many critics of theism put great emphasis on explaining away purported experiences of God. By their lights, claims to experience God or Brahman are either irrational or unreliable.[149]

Yes, people believe they have had experience of God, but their claims, some argue, cannot be tested, and therefore can give no reliable knowledge. What sort of evidential weight could such claims have for those who have not had similar experiences and have no way of testing secondhand reports? Although many suggest that the serious philosopher should give no epistemic weight to religious experience, hosts of authors have argued otherwise. An important turn in the middle of twentieth century philosophy gave these sorts of objections a new credibility when the grip of logical positivism finally began to weaken, a grip that it had held since the 1920s. The positivists' requirements for

---

[148]Michael Peterson, et al., *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16.

[149]Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 247.

justified knowledge were, to say the least, exorbitant. They "foreswore the meaningfulness of any statement that could be neither empirically verified nor analyzed as tautological."[150] This "verification principle" could not, however, bear its own weight. Its most obvious shortcoming was, as R. Douglas Geivett puts it, "that its own requirement was self-referentially incoherent: the 'verification principle' itself was neither empirically verifiable nor tautological. In retrospect, it is astonishing that the hubris puffed up by the pretensions of science could reach such proportions that it could not see its own belt buckle, much less its feet of clay."[151] The feet of clay crumbled, and arguments for the existence of God found a new degree of respect in some quarters of the philosophical community. In the 1960s it was the ontological argument that took the scene, and here of late, versions of the argument from religious experience have found their way to the front of the discussion, where they stand confidently alongside the cosmological and design arguments.[152]

Notwithstanding the revitalization of interest in the epistemic status of religious experience, questions about religious experience as a source of knowledge remain. A robust account of religious experience and defense of it as a source of knowledge would go a long way toward furthering McGrath's claim that religious experience is revelatory.

---

[150]R. Douglas Geivett, "The Evidential Value of Religious Experience," in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser (New York: Routledge, 2003), 175.

[151]Ibid.

[152]Ibid., 176.

William Blackstone expemplifies well the skeptical view of religious experience as a source of knowledge of God. He contends that "any cognitive religious sentence which bases its claim to truth on a private, subjective, immediate experience does not constitute knowledge."[153] He bases this claim on three classical criteria for what figures as knowledge. The first, which is a version of the correspondence theory, is the proposition that what one "knows" must actually be true. Second, the person who has knowledge must be sure of his or her belief. "One cannot say, 'I know x but I am not sure of x.' That a proposition constitutes knowledge does not entail *knowing* that it is true, but that a proposition constitutes knowledge does entail an epistemic attitude of certainty toward that proposition on the part of the owner."[154] Third, one must have the right to be sure of the believed proposition. "Stated roughly, one has the right to be sure of a belief if that belief is arrived at through generally reliable methods and if the data collected by those methods strongly support that belief."[155] All three criteria must be met to justify knowledge.

Blackstone gives several pragmatic reasons for accepting these criteria. First, they have "proven fruitful in practice enabling us to make predictions and in general to adjust to our environment."[156] Second, they enable individuals to solve the problem of

---

[153]William Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge: The Impact of Philosophical Analysis on the Question of Religious Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 140.

[154]Ibid., 131.

[155]Ibid., 132.

[156]Ibid., 136.

deciding "what degrees of belief one should accord to cognitive statements (statements with 'some clear meaning') of various kinds."[157] Third, when applied to purported factual statements, they serve as a "continually self-correcting procedure, the very opposite of dogmatism."[158] Finally, they lead to a logically consistent belief system.[159]

Because a claim must be testable if one is to determine its satisfaction of these criteria for knowledge, and because Blackstone contends that religious experiences are not intersubjectively verifiable, he rejects statements based upon such experiences: "Clearly, if experience is taken as a guarantee of its own validity, then there is no way of distinguishing knowledge claims which are credible from those which are not, and hence no way of solving the central problem of epistemology, namely what degree of belief one should accord to cognitive sentences of various kinds."[160]

This style of argument has obvious implications for biblical authority, specifically McGrath's claim that the guiding stratum of revelation is canonical Scripture. In Blackstone's economy, if the experience of the biblical authors is rejected, the authority of their writings must be questioned. If the experiences of the biblical authors cannot be tested to see whether they meet the three criteria for knowledge, then there will be much more than tentativeness about the Bible's authority. In such a scenario, the writers would have no right to believe that their message was from the Lord.

---

[157]Ibid.

[158]Ibid.

[159]Ibid.

[160]Ibid., 153.

Furthermore, claims about contemporary religious experience, which McGrath identifies as a valid strata of reality, would also be undermined.

What is the answer to such a challenge? Are arguments akin to Blackstone's assessment of the epistemic value of religious experience detrimental to McGrath's revelational understanding of religious experience? One possible solution has been suggested by Christian philosopher William Alston, who has written prolifically about the epistemological value of religious experience and has offered a careful analysis in his book, *Perceiving God*.[161] While a detailed investigation of Alston's argument could be the topic of another dissertation, a summative and evaluative excursus will be presented here as a way that McGrath might strengthen his (basically undefended) claim that religious experience is revelational, having a knowledge-producing effect. Additionally, given the tie between religious experience and the text of the Bible as mentioned above, Alston's case for religious experience also gives indirect support for McGrath's claim that Scripture is a layer of divine revelation.[162]

---

[161]William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). That Alston authored the article on religious experience in the ten-volume *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is evidence of his influence in the field. William Alston, "Religious Experience," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), 250-55.

[162]Blackstone also noticed this connection, arguing that if religious experience is not a source of knowledge, then arguments for revealed Scripture as a source of knowledge are necessarily problematic. Assuming (wrongly) that he has been successful in undermining religious experience as a source of knowledge, Blackstone writes, "Even the claim that a given book is a revelation of God requires reference to the revelation first being given someone in his personal experience and then being put into words in a book. All religious sentences, then, which purport to have objective import and which have as

Alston's argument. Before looking at Alston's defense of religious experience as a source of knowledge, it bears mentioning that while McGrath shows more appreciation of Schleiermacher than Alston, neither McGrath nor Alston is attempting to give religious experience a more important (or even equal) place than Scripture in the theological task. Alston says specifically, "I have no aspiration to be a late twentieth–century Schliermacher [*sic*], spinning the whole web of Christian doctrine out of the personal experience of the contemporary believer," [163] and while McGrath does need to make some clarifications on how he would prevent these other layers of revelation from usurping the place of Scripture in theology, he nevertheless make it clear that Christian doctrine is rooted in much more than experience and foundationally in Christian Scripture.

Alston's "chief aim" in *Perceiving God* is "to defend the view that putative direct awareness of God *can* provide justification for certain kinds of beliefs about God."[164] He calls the awareness of God or religious experience "putative" to avoid the charge that he is assuming what he is trying to demonstrate, namely the specific claim that perception of God is a result of God actually presenting himself.

Departing from the subtitle of *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious*

---

their justifying grounds merely 'religious experience' cannot be classified as knowledge." Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge*,144.

[163]William P. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 103.

[164]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 9. Emphasis added.

Experience, Alston prefers to call his epistemological category of religious experience "mystical perception." This is a narrower term than "religious experience" as it refers to "only those experiences in which it seems that God 'appears' or 'presents Himself' to one as so-and-so."[165] The term is used to make that distinction, referring primarily to the kind of interaction with God that Alston is defending as grounds for religious knowledge. This is not equivalent to non-cognitive mystical experience wherein "the One" or some other so-called Ultimacy is experienced directly.[166] It is also to be distinguished from another form of religious experience, one which Alston sees as complimentary to a defense of religious belief, wherein one experiences a change in one's "relationship to others after a conversion or renewal of one's faith."[167] Mystical experience is clearly revelational for Alston, and he therefore calls his view the "Theory of Appearing."[168]

After a long discussion of claims to mystical perception in chapter 1 of *Perceiving God*, Alston identifies in chapter 2 the concepts and assumptions that he uses to argue that mystical perception can justify M-beliefs (beliefs about God that are based on putative perception of God). He begins with a general discussion of epistemic

---

[165]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 34.

[166]Alston clearly distances himself from the common understanding of mysticism, which he calls extreme mysticism. For example he writes, "The most common acceptation of the term among scholars of the subject . . . is tailor made for what I have just called 'extreme mystical experience' in which all distinctions are transcended, even the distinction of subject and object. . . . Thus our category of mystical experience and 'mystical experience' (more commonly so called) fail to coincide at several points" (ibid., 24-25).

[167]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 286-87.

[168]Ibid., 9.

justification. As a starting point, he states the following:

> Justification is an evaluative status; to be justified is to be in an evaluatively
> favorable position. For one to be *epistemically* justified in holding a belief, as
> opposed to *prudentially* or morally justified, is for it to be a good thing, *from the*
> *epistemic point of view*, for one to believe that p (then, under those conditions). We
> may think of the epistemic point of view as defined by the aim at maximizing the
> number of one's true beliefs and minimizing the number of one's false beliefs.
> Justification is a matter of degree. If I am justified in believing that Sam is guilty
> because of the evidence for this, I can be more or less justified depending on the
> amount and strength of the evidence.[169]

He further states that justification must have an adequate ground, and that the ground

must "be adequate in the objective sense that the ground be such as to render it

objectively likely that the belief be true."[170]

What is adequate ground for justification in the instance religious experience,

of mystical sense perception? Simply put, Alston holds that there is *no* noncircular

justification for mystical perception. This is not sufficient reason, however, for rejecting

mystical perception as a source of knowledge because there is also no noncircular

justification for sense perception. Even the physical senses, which are widely accepted to

be sources of knowledge, can only be justified in a circular manner. Specifically, one

finds that the only way to know that a belief based on the physical senses is correct is to

use the sense perception that one is trying to defend as trustworthy. This is clearly

circular for Alston. He offers the following example:

> You form the perceptual belief that there is a goldfinch just outside the kitchen
> window; and the situation is quite normal. Your belief is correct. But how do I tell
> that your belief is correct? The most obvious way is to take a look myself to see

---

[169]Ibid., 72.

[170]Ibid., 75.

whether there is really a goldfinch there. But then I am relying on the reliability of sense perception in order to amass my evidence. In supposing that I have ascertained in each case that the perceptual belief under examination is correct, I have assumed that my sense experience is yielding true beliefs. Thus I am assuming [the proposition that sense experience is a reliable source of perceptual beliefs] in adducing evidence for it, and so it would appear that my argument is circular.[171]

This circularity is not necessarily a bad thing for Alston. If defenses of both sensory perception *and* religious experience are circular, it will be much easier to demonstrate that they have comparable epistemic grounds. Over time, humans learn to believe *direct experience* without justification. This is what Nicholas Wolterstorff refers to when he avers, "Beliefs are formed in us by the activation of our belief-dispositions."[172] When a person believes something directly, like "the light just went out," they do not have to reason their way to that truth. Such beliefs are formed according to the history of that person's sense experience and are thus basic. Mavrodes summarizes:

> No doubt, for example, I sometimes recognize the validity of some complex and arcane argument by analyzing it into a series of simpler arguments. But somewhere—for me, anyway—such analyses come to an end. I get to a point where I seem to recognize directly that a certain argument (or argument form), such as *modus ponens,* is valid. Just as in the case of physical actions, if there are not some cognitive acts that are basic, then it is hard to see how I could get started on the cognitive life at all.[173]

These "doxastic practices," as Alston calls them, are sufficient for

---

[171]William P. Alston, "Epistemic Circularity," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 (1986): 5.

[172]Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 279.

[173]George I. Mavrodes, *Revelation in Religious Belief* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 108.

distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate beliefs. We do not "decide" to

believe certain things. Harold Netland summarizes Alston's conclusion: "[B]eliefs

formed through the relevant doxastic practices can be granted prima facie justification,

and if there are no sufficient 'overriders' (factors that would rebut or undermine the

beliefs), then they can be considered 'unqualifiedly justified' as well."[174] This is so even

without conclusive evidence. Some things do not need evidence; they are known

directly. As Nash explains, "attempts to set religious experiences apart from ordinary,

nonreligious experiences are beset by arbitrariness, philosophical gerrymandering, and

assorted other acts of philosophical malfeasance."[175]

      Objections to Alston. Objections to Alston come in several forms. Some have

raised the question of whether there may be a sufficient natural explanation that accounts

for religious experience as well as or better than Alston's theistic theory. Daniels raises

one form of this objection, contending that its easy to see why people believe that they

are experiencing an objective religious reality, like God, when there actually is no such

reality. The ease with which he sees the possibility of belief in such implausible

experiences flows out of a much more basic set of presuppositions. He asserts that given

the vastness and randomness of the universe, and especially what appears to be a perverse

distribution of happiness and misery across the earth, "It is very difficult to believe that

---

[174]Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 276.

[175]Nash, *Faith and Reason*, 156.

one's own existence has any real importance."[176] Furthermore, "Ethics is *hard*. The

most difficult task of all is to find any really clear, convincing, and practical answers to

moral questions, to questions of how one *ought* to live one's life.[177] Flowing out of these

observations is Daniels's appeal to natural explanations of religious experiences.

> If only from pragmatic motives, we very much *want* there to be an understandable
> order to the universe, we very much *want* our lives to be of consequence, and we
> very much *want*, to know in practical detail what's right and wrong. Religion
> addresses what we very much want. The universe has an intelligible order because
> there is an intelligent powerful God who made it. We are important because God
> made us (as Christians say, "in His image") and gave us the faculties of
> understanding and free intelligent action. And God, being knowledgeable and
> perfect, is the ultimate moral authority—if He says it's right, *it's right*! People are
> known to let their desires, hopes, and fears color and cloud their critical faculties.
> No wonder they believe in a religious reality!—especially in those societies in
> which religious institutions are common and people are brought up to do so. And
> when God becomes personalized enough to do the job demanded by persons who
> are specifically fervent, searching, or emotionally disturbed, "religious experiences"
> are then to be expected.[178]

Alston rightly labels this as an imaginative exercise that proves nothing.[179]

Such factors as concern for morality or search for meaning still leave the question open

as to whether people actually perceive God. Could not God be present himself through

these "human" quests? For example, someone may suggest that if religious experience

"can be adequately explained in terms of natural factors, that would show that God isn't

---

[176]Charles B. Daniels, "Experiencing God," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1989): 497.

[177]Ibid.

[178]Ibid.

[179]William P. Alston, "Reply to Daniels," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1989): 506.

really being perceived in the experience."[180] Nevertheless, one could rightly respond by saying, "After all, it is very plausible to suppose that all experience, including sense experience, is *proximately* caused only by goings on in the brain; but that is not taken to show that the supposed perceived external objects exercise no causal influence on the experience and thereby cannot be perceived therein."[181] When natural causes are asserted as superior explanations for religious experience, there is no reason why one could not accept that the natural causes play a role in the experience while also accepting that God figures "further back in the causal chain leading to the experience" and is thus a "live candidate for what is perceived therein."[182]

Geivett points out another, slightly different, naturalistic objection to the veracity of religious experience. Rather than pointing to humankind's need of meaning and significance, some authors have argued for a widespread pathological source for religious experiences. Some of the pathologies with which various authors have credited this explanatory power include "hyper-suggestibility (from self-induced hypnotic suggestion to brainwashing); deprivation; sexual frustration; anxiety, panic, and amorphous foreboding that tend to trigger defense mechanisms; regression; mental illness (from hysteria to delusions to manic depression); and abnormal physiological states

---

[180]Ibid.

[181]Ibid.

[182]Ibid.

induced by drugs."[183]

Geivett has responded to those who identify the source of religious experience in these and similar pathologies, asking them to sift through the data of claims to religious experience and set aside only those cases where there is "a strong presumption in favor of pathological explanation."[184] The naturalist will argue that he only has the option to identify the remaining cases as pathological as well, but there is surely some difference between clearly pathological cases and possibly pathological cases. Geivett suggests, therefore, that "The best explanation for this difference may well be that experiences in the first group are artificial and experiences in the second group are veridical. There must, after all, be *some* explanation for this difference."[185]

Is Geivett's line of reasoning convincing? Are we really to think that the naturalist would sift between clearly pathological cases and probable? As naturalists, these skeptics assume from the start that *all cases* are pathological. One may get them to admit to degrees of intensity among different pathologies, but could one ever convince a naturalist of the sort that Geivett engages to say that a case of religious experience is *probably* pathological?

It seems that a better approach to the appeal to pathologies could be adapted directly from Alston's response to those who ground religious experience in natural

---

[183]Geivett, "The Evidential Value of Religious Experience," 194. "Come to think of it," Geivett adds, "it is a wonder more naturalists do not simply invent from scratch a pathology specific to of-God experiences" (ibid.).

[184]Ibid., 195.

[185]Ibid.

causes. So what if anxiety or panic gives rise to religious experience? What does this

say about causes further back in the causal chain? Could not anxiety or panic be used as

a means *through which* a person experiences God?[186]

A final objection remains: if Alston's proposal is accepted, there remains a

challenge for the exclusive claims concerning the Christian message. Specifically,

competing religious claims that all appear to satisfy the criteria for genuine mystical

perception are ubiquitous in today's world. Alston recognizes this, acknowledging that

religious diversity is "the most difficult problem" for his position.[187] He states the

difficulty this way:

> Since each form of MP [mystical perception] is, to a considerable extent,
> incompatible with all the others, not more than one such form can be (sufficiently)
> reliable as a way of forming beliefs about the Ultimate. For if one is reliable, then
> most of the beliefs that issue from it are true; and hence, because of the
> incompatibility, a large portion of the beliefs issuing from the others will be false;
> and so none of the others is a reliable practice. Now why should I suppose that
> CMP [Christian mystical perception] is the one that is reliable (if any are)?[188]

Blackstone, though not specifically addressing Alstonian mystical perception,

raises this problem of religious diversity as well. He holds that one cannot blindly accept

religious knowledge as a special kind of knowledge that does not require testing. If such

knowledge requires no testing, "the believer is left in the position of having to accept all

---

[186]Even in the case of abnormal physiological states that are induced by drugs, could not God present himself in such a state and help the addict to see that he is grasping for something that drugs can never offer. Furthermore, could God not overwhelm the addict with the awareness of his presence and how much more that presence is to be preferred than drug induced highs?

[187]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 255.

[188]Ibid., 269.

religious claims based on this appeal as being true, for there are no rules of justification which enable him to distinguish true religious claims from false ones or veridical religious experiences from non-veridical ones. One would even have to accept religious sentences which are self-contradictory, for there are such sentences which are based on the appeal to religious experience."[189]

Alston believes that there may be reasons within the Christian tradition to accept Christian religious experience (CMP) over religious experience in other religions, but he is aware of the following argument as one that needs a careful answer if the argument for the knowledge-producing effect of religious experience is to succeed:

> No doubt, within CMP there are weighty reasons for supposing it to be much more reliable than its rivals; in the practice of CMP we find God telling people things that imply this. It is claimed from within the Christian tradition that God has assured us that His Holy Spirit will guide the church in its decisions, will keep it from error, will provide a 'testimony' the accuracy of the words of Christ, and so on. But, of course, each of the competing traditions can also produce conclusive internal reasons in support of its claims. Hence, if it is to be rational for me to take CMP to be reliable, I will have to have sufficient independent reasons for supposing that CMP is reliable, or more reliable or more likely to be reliable, than its alternatives. But no such reasons are forthcoming. Hence, it cannot be rational to engage in CMP; and by the same reasoning it cannot be rational to engage in any other form of MP.[190]

This argument essentially says that without adequate reasons for accepting that Christian religious experience is reliable above all other forms of religious experience, Christian religious experience must be rejected along with the rest. The application of this to biblical revelation is obvious. If we compare a biblical writer's claim to revelation to that

---

[189]Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge,* 143.

[190]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 269.

of a non-Christian prophet, we have no way to determine whose experience is accurate. That is to say, we lack a way (that avoids question begging) to determine whose experience of God is genuine. In light of the incompatible claims, divergent instructions for life, and conflicting paths to salvation that arise from the two experiences, it makes no sense to hold that both could be genuine. Must it be the case, however, as the above argument asserts, that if we can't determine which form of MP is reliable, none of them are? Could one of them not actually *be* reliable even though we cannot determine which one?

Alston presents a detailed argument of how this is the case with sense perception in general. Whether our true mode of sense perception is Aristotelian, Cartesian, Whiteheadian, and so on is the subject of much debate. "*If* these alternatives really are possible, then they give rise to difficulties for the rationality of engaging in SP [sense perception] that are quite parallel to those arising from the actual diversity of religions for the rationality of engaging in CP [Christian epistemic practice]. And so, in that case, if it is rational to engage in SP despite these difficulties, the same conclusion follows for CP."[191]

Alston holds that all forms of religious experience cannot be rejected just because one does not know which one is genuine. Why then is Alston a Christian? Why does he accept Christian religious experience as superior to all other forms if there is no way of determining with a rational degree of certainty which is genuine? Alston answers:

In the absence of any external reason for supposing that one of the competing

---

[191]Ibid., 274. Emphasis in original.

practices is more accurate than my own, the only rational course for me is to sit tight with the practice of which I am a master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world. But our actual situation with regard to CP [Christian epistemic practice] is precisely parallel to the one we have been imagining. Hence, by parity of reasoning, the rational thing for a practitioner of CP to do is to continue to form Christian M-beliefs [beliefs about God that are based on putative perception of God], and, more generally, to continue to accept, and operate in accordance with, the system of Christian belief.[192]

In other words, he holds to the truths of Christian revelation, rather than those emerging from conflicting traditions, because he knows more about the Christian tradition and receives wise guidance from its teachings.

This still, however, does not answer the question of whether Christianity can maintain its exclusive claims. People in non-Christian traditions could also take Alston's position. A Muslim could just as easily argue that he is master of the Muslim tradition and is guided well by its teachings. This would parallel Alston's claim and would leave the question of which of the two competing claims is closer to reality. Alston's theory does not answer those claims. Schellenberg concurs:

Religious believers sensitive to the issue of religious diversity must find some plausible way of arguing that the "facts" of pluralism assumed by the critic . . . are not facts after all—that there are no incompatibilities of the sort in question (at least not on fundamental matters) and/or that there are strong independent reasons for viewing one of the relevant alternatives—their own—as epistemologically preferable to others.[193]

While holding to the necessity of his case for knowledge through religious experience, Alston nevertheless admits its incompleteness. He writes, "At more than one place I have

---

[192]Ibid.

[193]J. L. Schellenberg, "Religious Experience and Religious Diversity: A Reply to Alston," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 216.

hinted that this is not the whole story of the epistemic support of religious belief and that in a comprehensive treatment, mystical perception would be integrated into a larger picture."[194] He almost has to adopt this position given the problem of religious diversity. That problem leaves the Christian wondering why the claims to divine knowledge from the writers of the Bible or from contemporary claims to religious expereince are to be accepted over those who have had conflicting experiences or mystical perceptions of God. One definitely cannot rule out, as does Blackstone, the possibility that genuine knowledge of God—genuine revelation—may come through mystical perception or religious experience. Just because the experiences themselves cannot be tested does not mean that one of them cannot be genuine. Alston has ably defended the possibility of their genuineness, and yet the question of the genuineness of specifically Christian experience is left undefended. Alston admits that he will remain a Christian because it is the tradition that has served him best and about which he is more of an expert. Yet, even he admits that no one ground is sufficient, in and of itself, to support belief, but he does take it that "each can carry part of the load."[195] This is an important observation that could improve McGrath's defense of critical theological realism. His natural theology alone is not sufficient to the task of creating a public theology that can have a significant voice in the science-theology dialogue. Alston does not believe his theory can carry the epistemic load alone, but rather that it needs the aid of other grounds for religious belief. Likewise McGrath's natural theology, and more specifically, his appeal to religious

---

[194]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 286.

[195]Ibid.

experience, is at best incomplete. Recognizing the incompleteness of his own work,

Alston appeals to a cumulative case approach, arguing that his mystical-perception

defense plays a significant role in a much larger cumulative case for Christianity.

The cumulative case method is also a solution for the circularity problem.

Grudem recognizes difficulties that arise from accepting circularity in arguments for

ultimate authority. His answer to such difficulties is also a mild cumulative-case

approach:

> Ultimately the truthfulness of the Bible will commend itself as being far more
> persuasive that other religious books (such as the *Book of Mormon* or the *Qur'an*),
> or than any other intellectual constructions of the human mind (such as logic, human
> reason, sense experience, scientific methodology, etc.). It will be more persuasive
> because in the actual experience of life, all of these other candidates for ultimate
> authority are seen to be inconsistent or to have shortcomings that disqualify them,
> while the Bible will be seen to be fully in accord with all that we know about the
> world around us, about ourselves and about God.[196]

Christianity is compelling in light of so much more than the argument for religious

experience. It is rooted in history, and history can be investigated. Jesus was raised from

the dead in history. No plausible alternative can explain the radical changes in the lives

of the apostles and early church.[197] Obviously, other avenues of defense could be

taken,[198] but this is not the place to present a comprehensive cumulative case for

---

[196]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 79.

[197]Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Downers Grove, IL:
InterVarsity, 1997), 128-31.

[198]Some places to look for these avenues are R. Douglas Geivett and Gary
Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in
History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997); J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular
City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

Christianity.

This excursus on religious experience has presented a way that McGrath might develop and defend the revelational role of religious experience, as a stratum of reality, a significant position that he posits but does not defend. His views on the other layers of revelation are much more problematic than his regard for religious experience and Scripture as layers of revelation. For example, he regards Christian patterns of worship, communities "brought together by a shared faith," institutional structures "such as the episcopacy," and images such as the cross as strata of revelation. The claim that these actually are layers of revelation is left completely undeveloped, with McGrath only giving a few pages describing the layers. McGrath's application of stratification to the theological concept of revelation, then, is an area that needs much more work.

McGrath's Project Looking Forward: Issues for Further Study

While McGrath has offered much to consider with respect to his scientific theology in general and more specifically his defense and use of critical realism, a number of methodological areas into which McGrath has yet to foray present themselves as additional areas of potentially fruitful study. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to develop these areas; thus, only suggestions for further study will be made here. Ample opportunity exists for McGrath or those who accept the basic workings of his critical realism to move beyond broader methodological issues and to interact with the technical details of theological method. This final section will thus suggest three such areas, opportunities that McGrath or those who adopt his critical realist methodology may take.

First, McGrath's religious epistemology, as it stands, is incomplete, being

comprised almost entirely of critical realist insights in conjunction with a revised natural theology. His natural theology itself is incomplete, at best, and this dissertation has suggested that it is also has some problems in its basic assumptions. Furthermore, McGrath's critical realism, while offering keen insights into the mechanics of human knowledge in general, and knowledge of God more particularly, is also incomplete as a religious epistemology. For those who agree that a robust epistemology of religious knowledge is an important part of theological method, it seems reasonable to expect to see McGrath expand his own religious epistemology, answering objections to his revised natural theology, and developing keenly argued views on other topics that typically arise when discussing such matters. McGrath has touched on some of these issues only briefly in some of his popular works, and a robust and careful treatment of them would be a welcome addition to any additional work he does on theological method.[199]

A second area that may prove to be fruitful for academic study of theological method and critical realism would focus on critical realism's claim that reality is stratified. As seen in this chapter, McGrath's defense of this view is fairly brief, and future work in this area could profit greatly from an extended philosophical and theological defense of reality's stratification. He has forced the concept of stratification into certain areas, making applications found to be problematic in this dissertation, but he has not interacted with other areas that may prove more fruitful. Specifically, the idea of

---

[199]A number of such issues in the epistemology of religion have been raised in a recent volume edited by Geivett and Sweetman. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman, eds., *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

stratification may prove helpful in its application to the technical theological task. For example, it might be fruitfully argued that the reality of the biblical text is itself stratified. Evangelicals already accept that the reality of the Bible is comprised of multiple genres, and some evangelicals even admit the possibility that single texts have stratified layers of meaning. A critical realist investigation of these issue may yield some fresh ways of thinking about long-stagnated issues or areas in which evangelicals are currently in gridlock.

Finally, there seems to be a wealth of opportunity when it comes to further defense and application of critical realism's claim that ontology determines epistemology. McGrath has made significant application of this point in his rejection of the claim that theology is not scientific because it does not use the methodologies of the natural sciences, but there are important points left to be made and developed. For example, he rightly suggests that the object of theology should determine the methods of theology, but the specifics of what that object determines, epistemologically speaking, is currently underdeveloped in McGrath's work. A wealth of theological work exists on issues surrounding the knowledge of God, but there is a strong need for a project that interacts with this growing body of literature from a critical realist perspective with special reference to and defense of the claim that ontology determines epistemology.[200] A potential application of the "ontology determines epistemology" position of critical

---

[200]William J. Abraham has done recent work that attempts to base religious epistemology on a prior theism and the kind of epistemology that theism would entail. It is fairly brief and therefore does not interact widely with contemporary literature on the knowledge of God. William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*

realism might be extended to the nature (ontology) of Scripture and the epistemology (the interpretive procedures) that this nature requires. Another potential application of the "ontology determines epistemology" position of critical realism is the relationship between the nature of the church and the necessity of historical theology. It is fairly common among evangelicals to discuss various metaphors for the church when talking about the ontology or nature of the church. For example, one biblical metaphor for the church is "the body of Christ."[201] In Ephesians 4:11-16 the church is described as the body of Christ who is the head of the body. By its very nature the church is comprised of parts that serve various functions (teaching and evangelism, for example) crucial to the proper functioning of that body.[202]

If this is by nature the composition of the church, then it stands to reason that wherever the church is found in history, teachers of the Word will also be found. Accordingly, the history of Christian thought is much more than the study of natural men thinking natural thoughts about the biblical text. Many of the thinkers encountered in the

---

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

[201]John Hammett and Wayne Grudem, for example, discuss the metaphor of "the body of Christ" under their discussion of the nature of the church. Both Hammett and Grudem recognize that there are slight variations in the various scriptural uses of this metaphor. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 858-59. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 37-43.

[202]More specifically, apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers are among the parts that, "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Eph 4:12-14).

history of Christian thought are part of the body of Christ, given by God (according to the passage just cited in Ephesians) to interpret and contextualize the Bible.[203] Many evangelicals have therefore rightly recognized the reciprocal relationship between the history of Christian thought and contemporary theological formulation.[204] In response to this recognition, evangelical theologians have likewise been involved in the actual task of historical theology.[205] At this juncture, and given McGrath's keen interest in history,

---

[203]This obviously does not entail for evangelicals that the teachings of those in church history are infallible. McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation in Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 150.

[204]For example James Leo Garrett writes, "Good systematic theology ought to be based on the fruitage of biblical theology and the history of Christian doctrine. Hence I have made every effort to locate, interpret, and correlate all the pertinent Old and New Testament texts or passages and the more significant statements from the patristic period to the modern age before undertaking any formulation of my own." James Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (North Richland Hills, TX: Bibal, 2000), ix. Also see Daniel H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

[205]Historical theology may be conceived of in several ways. It may rightly be construed as a discipline in its own right, one that investigates the history of Christian thought and the historical contexts from which the many theological works in Christian history emerged. This discipline is naturally descriptive and it pursues its subject matter in much the same way that any intellectual history is developed, whether it is the history of Islam or the history of western philosophical thought. Historical theology as it serves the theological task is, however, more than a descriptive task. It provides descriptions of the various stages of thought (and the developments between them) in Christian history and the persons attached to those thoughts, but it also plays a role in the search for biblical meaning and contemporary contextualization. With regard to the latter, historical theology may rightly be considered a part of the work of systematic theology. Osborne, for example, includes tradition as one of the components of theological construction (in systematic theology) along with Scripture, community, experience, and philosophy. Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 376-86.

there is a great need for applying critical realist insights to the question of how much, if any, historical theology can play a role in the exegetical, interpretive task. Critical realism may very well present a case for historical theology as a part of theological interpretation as well as providing insights into the actual practice of using historical theology as a component of the exegetical and theological task. For example, it could be argued, given critical realist tenets, that systematic theology cannot proceed apart from the insights of historical theology; its findings seem to serve as at least part of what comprises the systematic theologian's preunderstanding. Osborne, for example, maintains that "there could be no theological construction without tradition."[206] He continues by saying, "The interpreter does not directly or with complete objectivity apply the text of Scripture to a current issue. Rather, all theological understanding is consciously historical, as the biblical text is assimilated via tradition. Tradition not only informs but shapes our preunderstanding. As such it has a positive and often decisive role in every dogmatic decision."[207]

McGrath too recognizes the impact of tradition on interpretation and

---

[206]Ibid., 380. Osborne approvingly quotes Gadamer who contends that "understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused. This is what must be expressed in hermeneutical theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a process, a method." Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. and ed. Garrett Broden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975), 258-59, quoted in Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 380.

[207]Ibid.

theology,[208] but much work remains to be done from a critical realist perspective in this area. Critical realism may, for example, provide a way for contemporary theologians to account for the variety among contemporary theologies without resorting to blaming those differences on some sort of postmodern idea of multiple realities. In fact, it seems that it does open the door for such a claim, but a developed work on the method of historical theology from a critical realist perspective is a viable project that still needs to be written.[209] It may specifically be noted that whether or not the theologian has a developed sense of historical theology, or the background of his denomination or theological model, he brings something pre-formed to the theological task. Critical realism suggests that knowledge of theological reality is not threatened by this fact. A careful working out of these details is certainly a viable project.

Conclusion

McGrath's critical realist methodology faces several major challenges, but suggestions for facing these challenges have been made here. Specifically, an additional argument for global realism was added to McGrath's case for scientific realism, and his

---

[208]On this point, McGrath writes, "A willingness to listen—not to agree uncritically, I stress, but to *listen*—is of considerable importance in securing the stability of evangelical theological reflection." McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition," 151.

[209]Additionally, historical theology not only provides the preunderstanding that is necessary for theological understanding, but it also provides a model for contextualization. How theologians of the past contextualized the message of Scripture, a message discovered through exegesis and biblical theology, provides exemplary guidance for contemporary contextualization and where contemporary situations parallel situations in the past, contextualization may bear significant resemblance to those past works.

specific adoption of critical realism was defended against several criticisms. It was seen, however, that a strong case for scientific realism and critical realism, leaves the question of theological realism unanswered or at least insufficiently defended. McGrath offers a natural theology that assumes the existence of God and asks others outside the framework of Christianity to assume it too, along with other specifics of the Christian worldview, and to put the Christian worldview to the test. Because he has essentially constructed a natural theology that asks those outside the Christian framework to accept the biblical message of Christianity as a presupposition, some may claim that this approach is largely fideistic. It was therefore suggested that McGrath needs to offer a positive case for the Christian framework, the epistemic power of arguments from religious experience, and the veracity of Scripture, rather than asking those outside the framework to assume its viability.

It was also suggested that the criticisms of McGrath's natural theology will affect his proposal for dialogue between theology and the natural sciences. While all critical realists are apt to recognize the various strata investigated by the natural sciences, those practicing natural science, specifically those operating outside a theistic framework, are not likely to embrace the existence of the theological strata investigated by theologians, nor the God who is supposedly the object of study in that strata, based on assertion alone. McGrath seems to assume that others will gladly accept the existence of the object (God) that presents itself to theologians just as readily as they accept the reality of physical reality that presents itself to natural scientists in their study.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Attention to theological method remains crucial to the practice of good theology.[1] New academic and cultural developments require theologians to revisit the issues of methodology with increasing frequency. In particular, the postmodern storm of the last thirty years has raised new questions that a relevant evangelical theology must address, and while certain basics of evangelical theological method remain the same (for example, the Bible must always remain central to the task of theologizing) new challenges cannot be ignored.

This dissertation has been a study, albeit one of narrow scope, in theological method. Specifically, a careful examination and analysis of one component of Alister E.

---

[1]Cf. Stephen Wellum, "Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times,* ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004): 161-97. Wellum points to at least three reasons the study of method in theology is vitally important. First and most basically, "the glory of God and the cause of the gospel demand it" (ibid., 161). Clear theological method helps us live under the Lordship of Christ. "Indeed," he says, "it is precisely because of our commitment to the Lordship of Christ and the full authority of Scripture that we must reflect seriously on both how to read Scripture properly and how to apply it to our lives in a faithful, godly manner" (ibid., 162). Second, the reality of conflicting interpretations of Scripture must be accounted for and the basis for our claims to be biblical needs to be defended. And third, the rise of postmodernism, which largely calls the goal of one biblical viewpoint into question, requires response from those committed to truth (ibid., 162-65).

McGrath's theological method, namely "critical realism," has been offered. In particular, McGrath's defense and application of critical realism has been delineated and evaluated. The thesis defended in this dissertation is that McGrath has utilized critical realism in a way that strengthens his theological method and serves a number of good theological ends, yet a number of criticisms remain, criticisms that suggest McGrath's methodology is in need of revision in some areas and clarification in others if it is going to be theologically acceptable. Chapters 2-4 serve as the argument for this thesis.

McGrath's critical realism adequately addresses a number of theological challenges. From theological naïveté to relativism and theological antirealism, critical realism clears a number of barriers to effective and relevant theology. There was a time, perhaps, when the insights of critical realism would not have been helpful to the evangelical theologian. Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century, postmodern concerns about human situatedness (and related concerns about the wide diversity of truth claims) should be addressed—indeed, they *must* be addressed—lest evangelicals find themselves and their theology quarantined, having no voice in the public square.

In order to see how critical realism might help theology avoid quarantine, an overview of its history and a defense of its widespread applicability was given in chapter 2. It was argued by way of historical investigation that critical realism is not limited to any one subject matter but provides an epistemological stance from which a number of disciplines or studies might proceed—McGrath's included. Chapter 3 elaborated this claim, showing specific instances where critical realism serves McGrath's methodology and where critical realist tenets impact a number of methodological themes that McGrath engages. Chapter 4 provided an analysis of McGrath's use of critical realism. It was

seen that, despite several challenges, McGrath's critical realist methodology actually serves a number of good theological ends. His proposal for natural theology or the science-theology dialogue is incomplete and not without difficulties, but these shortcomings are a direct result of McGrath's application of critical realism rather than a problem with critical realism itself.

Much in McGrath's approach can be commended, but it is at its best incomplete. Christianity offers a compelling explanation of reality, yet some have found the naturalistic stories coming from the scientific community as compelling as, or more compelling, than the story of Christianity. This being the case, it seems that McGrath's critical realist methodology could be strengthened by taking a more positive approach to Christian apologetics, attempting to argue for the Christian framework rather than beginning with it. In theory, divine revelation and the framework it provides is given prior to the human quest for knowledge, but one can accept this claim and still engage those who do not in a way that enables rather than cuts off dialogue.

This valuable role of critical realism in McGrath's scientific theology is evident on three fronts. First, elements of critical realism—particularly those articulated by Roy Bhaskar—help to destabilize the prevalent belief that the methodology of the natural sciences is the only path to knowledge.[2] Second, critical realism is a corrective to those theological methods that only allow theology to speak in an intra-systematic way. McGrath's particular foil in this regard has been George Lindbeck's

---

[2]A view that is often merely assumed rather than argued.

postliberalism.[3] Third, McGrath's critical realism may also serve the projects of other

evangelical theologians. While there is no settled position on the details of evangelical

theological method, some grand themes span the breadth of evangelical camps. Perhaps

the grandest theme is that evangelical theology must be biblical. Even those who

promote a "Spirit-focused rather than text-focused understanding of the nature of biblical

trustworthiness"[4] still must use the text of the Bible in their theological constructions.[5]

Typically, evangelicals have moved from biblical studies through biblical theology and

then historical theology to contemporary theology and ethics. Critical realism already

plays a role in this traditional evangelical methodology, and there are a number of

additional areas to which it may have fruitful application. At its broadest level

McGrath's critical realism serves the evangelical theological task by offering a defense of

one of evangelicalism's fundamental assumptions, namely, theological realism.[6]

Evangelical theology, similarly to any intellectual endeavor, faces great

difficulties: "Our quests for knowledge . . . are limited and problem-laden, for we are

---

[3]Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 14-34. Alister E. McGrath, *Reality*, vol.2 of *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 39-54.

[4]Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 124.

[5]The thirteen-page Scripture index at the back of Stanley J. Grenz's *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) serves as an important example.

[6]One would search in vain for an evangelical theologian who is not committed to the ontological reality of God.

finite and never fully transcend the changing conditions on which we depend."[7] Critical

realism, however, seems to have recognized the weight of this claim and to have adjusted

accordingly. While some evangelicals resist critical realist tenets out of a fear that

relativism or uncertainty in theology might be the resulting rule, such outcomes need not

follow.

> It is a false dichotomy to force a choice between claiming to achieve a "final universally true perspective" and giving up on realism (and, therefore, objective truth) entirely. Critical realism realizes that we are always in process in the attempt to achieve a truer overall perspective or worldview. However, the alternative (some form of nonrealism or antirealism) necessitates the loss of truth completely. Theological perspectives ought to "get it right" as often as possible; correct theology is not impossible if the Scriptures teach the truth and if the Holy Spirit is still leading believers into the truth as we submit to Christ and apply ourselves earnestly and honestly to the task of knowing (Jn 16:13; Heb 5:14).[8]

While postmodern anti-realism contends that "The human mind freely constructs its ideas

without any reference to an alleged external world," critical realism maintains that

"reality is apprehended by the human mind which attempts to express and accommodate

that reality as best it can with the tools at its disposal."[9]

The answer a person gives concerning the realist-antirealist debate is

fundamental to his view of Christianity. What becomes of the promises of God in

Scripture if God is not extant independently of human thought? "The language of

---

[7]Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a Worldview*, Studies in a Christian Worldview, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 130.

[8]Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 132-33.

[9]McGrath, *Reality*, 195.

promises at least gives us some hope (and experience) that words may attain a very strong 'purchase' on reality."[10] What weight would the teachings of the Bible carry if they did not refer to reality? The word of "God" is powerful only if God actually is, and it is the "conviction that words have this power [that] leads us to attend closely to what they actually say and do not say—to what we call 'exegesis'. The very significance of the words draws forth an intense effort to understand them in their original form and setting."[11] In an antirealist worldview, however, the only thing in which detailed and diligent theology might be rooted is a love for the literary achievements of man. Beyond that, when it comes to the ultimate questions of life and death, the "Word of God" can *only* be the word of man. Here lies the end of hope.

Words can assure in a significant sense only in a realist view. If realism is true, "Words can be both trustworthy and true (Rev. 21:5; 22:6), for a true statement is one that honestly tells us *how things really are*. A true belief about something is one that is assured. To know the truth is to have a reliable knowledge that should be followed."[12] Humans are imbedded in culture, but knowledge can approach objectivity, having a referent in the real world "even though it is necessarily expressed in culture-laden ways

---

[10]Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 218.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Holmes, *Contours of a Worldview*, 130. Emphasis removed.

and believed or known by finite, culturally restricted people."[13] This is the lesson of

critical realism. "Critical realism in theology . . . makes a proposal about the

provisionality, but also about the reliability, of theological knowledge. Without losing

the validity of the fact that all our knowledge is always socially contextualized, critical

realists—with good reasons, but not on compelling grounds—claim reference for their

tentative proposals."[14] With this lesson in mind, and with the epistemic weight of

common sense in its favor, critical realism offers much to evangelical theology.

While McGrath has left the application of his critical realist methodology to

future works, he has nevertheless offered modern theology much more than a throat-

clearing prolegomena; he has given contemporary theologians a powerful "apologia for

the entire theological enterprise." [15]

---

[13]D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*
(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 99. His emphasis.

[14]J. Wentzel van Huysteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand
Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 43.

[15]Alister E. McGrath, *Theory*, vol. 3 of *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids:
Eerdmans, 2003), 297.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

Abraham, William J. *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

Allen, Paul L. *Ernan McMullin and Critical Realism in the Science-Religion Dialogue*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006.

Alston, William P. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

_____. *A Realist Conception of Truth*. Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1996.

Archer, Margaret, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson, and Alan Norrie, eds. *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Archer, Margaret S., Andrew Collier, and Douglas V. Porpora. *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Barbour, Ian G. *Issues in Science and Religion*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

_____. *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

_____. *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

_____. *Religion in an Age of Science*, The Gifford Lectures, vol. 1. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.

Barnett, Paul. *Jesus and the Logic of History*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997.

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance. Vol. 2. *The Doctrine of God*. Pt. 1. Translated by T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, Harold Knight, and J. L. M. Haire. Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1957.

_____. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. 4 vols. in 14 parts. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-75.

Bhaskar, Roy. *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*. London: Verso, 1993.

_____. *From East to West: Odyssey of a Soul*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

_____. *A Realist Theory of Science*. Leeds: Leeds Books, 1975.

_____. *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy*. London and New York: Verso, 1989.

Blackstone, William. *The Problem of Religious Knowledge: The Impact of Philosophical Analysis on the Question of Religious Knowledge*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963.

Bock, Darrell L. *Purpose Directed Theology: Getting our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002.

Bock, Darrell L., and Buist M. Fanning. *Interpreting the New Testament: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006

Braithwaite, Richard. *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955.

Brown, Andrew, Steve Fleetwood, and Michael Roberts, eds. *Critical Realism and Marxism*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Brunner, Emil, and Karl Barth. *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply, 'No!' by Dr. Karl Barth*. Translated by Peter Fraenkel. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002.

Byrne, Peter. *God and Realism*. Ashgate Philosophy of Religion Series. Edited by Paul Helm, Jerome Gellman, and Linda Zagzebski. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960.

Carson, D. A. *Exegetical Fallacies*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996.

_____. *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

Chernilo, Daniel. *A Social Theory of the Nation State: The Political Forms of Methodological Nationalism*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Clark, David K. *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*. Foundations of Evangelical Theology. Edited by John Feinberg. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003.

Collier, Andrew. *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy*. London and New York: Verso, 1994.

Cooper, John W. *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.

Creaven, Sean. *Marxism and Realism: A Materialistic Application of Realism in the Social Sciences*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Cupitt, Don. *Taking Leave of God*. London: SCM, 1981.

Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. 30th anniversary ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Denton, Donald L. Jr. *Historiography and Hermeneutics In Jesus Studies: An Examination Of The Work Of John Dominic Crossan And Ben F. Meyer*. London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004.

Drake, Durant, Arthur O. Lovejoy, James Bissett Pratt, Arthur K. Rogers, George Santa-Yana, Roy Wood Sellars, and C. A. Strong. *Essays in Critical Realism: A Cooperative Study of the Problem of Knowledge*. London: Macmillan, 1920.

Dummett, Michael. *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*. London: Duckworth, 1991.

Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998.

_____. *Truth Or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001.

Erickson, Millard J., Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds. *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.

Gadamer, Hans-George. *Truth and Method.* Translated and Edited by Garrett Broden and John Cumming. New York: Seabury, 1975.

Gardner, Sebastian. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kant and the "Critique of Pure Reason."* London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

Garrett, James, Jr. *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*. Vol. 1. 2ⁿᵈ ed. North Richland Hills, TX: Bibal, 2000.

Geisler, Norman and William E. Nix. *From God to Us: How We Got our Bible*. Chicago: Moody, 1974.

Geivett, R. Douglas, and Gary Habermas, eds. *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997.

Geivett, R. Douglas, and Brendan Sweetman, eds. *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Greer, Robert C. *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003.

Gregersen, Niels Henrik, and J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, eds. *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Grenz, Stanley J. *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21ˢᵗ Century*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993.

_____. *Theology for the Community of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

Groff, Ruth. *Critical Realism, Post-Positivism, and the Possibility of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Groothuis, Douglas. *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Hacking, Ian. *Representing and Intervening*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Hammett, John S. *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005.

Hauerwas, Stanley. *The Peaceable Kingdom*: *A Primer in Christian Ethics*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

Saint Hilary of Poitiers. *The Trinity*. Translated by Stephen McKenna. The Fathers of the Church, vol. 25. New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954.

Holmes, Arthur F. *Contours of a Worldview*. Studies in a Christian Worldview, vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.

James, William. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907.

Jensen, Peter. *The Revelation of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Jewett, Paul K. *God, Creation, and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *The Promise Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.

_____. *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 3rd ed. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996

Leplin, Jarrett. *A Novel Defense of Scientific Realism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Lewis, C. S. *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*. London: Collins, 1965.

Lindbeck, George A. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984.

Lints, Richard. *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomena to Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

Lonergan, Bernard J. F. *Method in Theology*. New York, Herder and Herder, 1972.

López, José, and Potter, Gary. *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*. London: Athlone, 2001.

Lycan, William G. *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Lynch , Michael P., ed. *The Nature of Truth: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001.

Marshall, I. Howard. *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.

Matthews, Michael R. *The Scientific Background to Modern Philosophy: Selected Readings*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.

Mavrodes, George I. *Revelation in Religious Belief*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

McGrath, Alister E. *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

_____. *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

_____. *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.

_____. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

_____. *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

_____. *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

_____. *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995.

_____. *Nature*. Vol. 1, *A Scientific Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

_____. *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008.

_____. *The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

_____. *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996.

_____. *Reality*. Vol. 2, *A Scientific Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

_____. *The Renewal of Anglicanism*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1993.

_____. *Science and Religion: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

_____. *The Science of God: An Introduction to Scientific Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

_____. *Theory*. Vol. 3, *A Scientific Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

_____. *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999.

McShane, Philip. *Language Truth and Meaning: Papers from The International Lonergan Congress 1970.* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972.

Meadows, Gary T., gen. ed., *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.

Meyer, Ben. *Critical Realism and the New Testament*. Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1989.

_____. *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics.* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994.

Meynell, Hugo A. *The Theology of Bernard Lonergan*. American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion, vol. 42. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986.

Miles, Grahame. *Science and Religious Experience: Are They Similar Forms of Knowledge?* Portland, OR, and Eastbourne, UK: Sussex, 2007.

Moore, Andrew. *Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar, and Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Moreland, J. P. *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity.* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987.

Moreland, J. P., and William Lane Craig. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003.

Morrison, John Douglas. *Knowledge of the Self-Revealing God in the Thought of Thomas Forsyth Torrance*. Issues in Systematic Theology, vol. 2. New York: Peter Lang, 1997.

Mulkay, Michael J. *Science and the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1979.

Nash, Ronald H. *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988.

Naugle, David K. *Worldview: The History of a Concept.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Need, Stephen W. *Human Language and Knowledge in Light of Chalcedon*. Theology and Religion, vol. 187. New York: Peter Lang, 1996.

Netland, Harold. *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001.

Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006.

Packer, J. I. *Knowing God*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975.

Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

Patomäki, Heikki. *After International Relations: Critical Realism and the (Re) Construction of World Politics*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Peacocke, Arthur. *God and Science: A Quest of Christian Credibility*. London: SCM, 1996.

_____. *Intimations of Reality: Critical Realism in Science and Religion*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

Peterson, Michael, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger. *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Pinnock, Clark. *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology*. Chicago: Moody, 1971.

Plekhanov, G. V. *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*. New York: International Publishers, 1969.

Polanyi, Michael. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958.

Polkinghorne, John. *Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005.

_____. *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

_____. *Reason and Reality: The Relationship between Science and Theology*. London: SPCK, 1991.

_____. *Science and Creation*: *The Search for Meaning*. London: SPCK, 1988.

_____. *Science and Christian Belief*. London: SPCK, 1994.

_____. *Science and Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.

_____. *The Way the World Is*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.

Poythress, Vern S. *Redeeming Science: A God Centered Approach.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006.

Putnam, Hilary. *The Many Faces of Realism*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1987.

_____. *Realism and Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Redhead, Michael. *From Physics to Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Rorty, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Mineapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Hermeneutics: The Hand-written Manuscripts.* Translated by James Duke and Jack Forstman. Edited by Heinz Kimmerle. Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977.

Schreiner, Thomas R. *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.

Sellars, Roy Wood. *Critical Realism: A Study of the Nature and Conditions of Knowledge*. Chicago and New York: Rand McNally, 1916.

Taliaferro, Charles. *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion.* Oxford Blackwell, 1998.

Tate, W. Randolph. *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*. 3rd ed. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008.

Thiessen, Henry C. *Lectures in Systematic Theology*. Revised by Vernon D. Doerksen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.

Thomas, Robert L. *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old.* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002.

Torrance, Thomas F. *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*. London: Lutterworth, 1949.

_____. *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons*. Edinburgh and New York: T&T Clark, 1996.

_____. *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958.

_____. *Reality and Scientific Theology*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985.

_____. *The School of Faith*. London: James Clark, 1959.

_____. *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994.

Tracy, David. *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.

Tyrrell, George. *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*. London: Black, 1963.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005.

_____. *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002.

_____. *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

_____. *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.

Van Huysteen, J. Wentzel. *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.

Williams, Daniel H. *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

_____. *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984.

Wright, N.T. *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. 3 vols. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992-2003.

_____. *The New Testament and the People of God*. Vol. 1, *Christian Origins and the People of God.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.

Articles

Abraham, William J. "Religious Epistemology." In *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Christian Thought*. Edited by Alister McGrath. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.

_____. "Revelation and Natural Theology." In *Alister E. McGrath and*

Evangelical Engagement: A Dynamic Engagement, ed. Sung Wook Chung, 264-79. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

Achtemeier, P. Mark. "The Truth of Tradition: Critical Realism in the Thought of Alasdair MacIntryre and T. F. Torrance." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994): 355-74.

Alston, William P. "Christian Experience and Christian Belief." In *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, 103-34. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

_____. "Epistemic Circularity." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 (1986): 1-30.

_____. "Religious Experience." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward Craig. New York: Routledge, 1998.

_____. "Religious Experience and Religious Belief." *Nous* 16 (1982): 3-12.

_____. "Reply to Daniels." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1989): 501-06.

_____. "Why Should there Not Be Experience of God?" In *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology,* ed. Brian Davies, 382-86. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Carson, D. A. "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology." In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000.

Chung, Sung Wook. "Preface." In *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Engagement: A Dynamic Engagement*, ed. Sung Wook Chung, vii-viii. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

Collier, Andrew. "Critical Realism." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward Craig. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

Currie, D. A. "Thomas Forsyth Torrance." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Walter A. Elwell. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001.

Cupitt, Don. "Anti-Realist Faith." In *Is God Real?* ed. Joseph Runzo, 45-59. New York: St. Martins, 1993.

_____. "Don Cupitt: Introduction" [on-line]. Accessed 25 March 2011. Available from http://www.doncupitt.com/doncupitt.html; Internet

Daniels, Charles B. "Experiencing God." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1989): 487-99.

Davaney, Sheila Greeve, and Delwin Brown. "Postliberalsm." In *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*. Edited by Alister E. McGrath. Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1993.

Davids, Peter H. Review of *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, by Robert L. Thomas. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (2004): 491-92.

DeRouchie Jason S., and Jason C. Meyer. "Christ or Family as the "Seed" of Promise? An Evaluation of N. T. Wright on Galatians 3:16." *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14, no. 3 (2010): 36-48.

Dress, Willem B. Review of *Reality*, by Alister E. McGrath. *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), sec. 3. [journal on-line]. Accessed 31 January 2011. Available from http://www.arsdisputandi.org; Internet.

Frankina, William K. "Roy Wood Sellars (1880-1973)." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1974): 230-32.

Geivett, R. Douglas. "The Evidential Value of Religious Experience." In *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Paul Copan and Paul Moser, 175-203. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Grant, Colin. "Why Should Theology Be Unnatural?" *Modern Theology* 23 (2007): 91-106.

Gregersen, Niels Henrik. "Critical Realism and Other Realisms." In *Fifty Years in Science and Religion: Ian G. Barbour and His Legacy*. Ashgate Science and Religion Series, ed. Robert John Russell, 77-95. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004.

Grier, James M., Jr. "The Apologetical Value of the Self-Witness of Scripture." *Grace Theological Journal* 1 (1980): 71-76.

Griffin, David Ray. "On Ian Barbour's *Issues in Science and Religion*." *Zygon* 23 (1988): 57-81.

Grudem, Wayne. "Scripture's Self Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture. " In *Scripture and Truth,* ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, 19-59. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983.

Haack, Susan. "Realism." *Synthese* 73 (1987): 275-99

Helm, Paul. Review of *Science and Christian Belief*, by John Polkinghorne. *Science and*

Christian Belief 7 (1995): 59- 64.

Hensley, Jeffry. "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists? Reexamining the Metaphysics of Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology." In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, 69-80. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996.

Kukla, André, and Joel Walmsley, "A Theories Predictive Success Does Not Warrant Belief in the Unobservable Entities It Postulates." In *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Science*, ed. Christopher Hitchcock, 133-48. Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

Lauden, Larry. "A Confutation of Convergent Realism," *Philosophy of Science* 48:1 (March 1984), 19-49.

Losch, Andreas. "On the Origins of Critical Realism." *Theology and Science* 7, no.1 (2009): 85-106.

McGrath, Alister E. "Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition." In *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, 139-58. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.

_____. "Evangelical Theological Method: The State of the Art." In *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, 15- 37. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.

_____. "A Particularist View." In *Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, 151-80. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

_____. "Reality, Symbol and History: Theological Reflections on N. T. Wright's Portrayal of Jesus." In *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman, 159-79. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999.

McQuilkin, Robertson, and Bradford Mullen. "The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 69-82.

Miller, Caleb. "Realism, Antirealism, and Common Sense." In *Realism and Antirealism*, ed. William Alston, 13-25. Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2002.

Moreland, J. P., and Garrett DeWeese, "The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise." In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, 80-107. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.

Moritz, Thorsten. "Critical Realism." In *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

Morrison, John D. "Trinity and Church: An Examination of Theological Methodology." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 445-54.

Murphy, Nancey. "Ian Barbour on Religion and the Methods of Science." *Zygon* (March 1996): 11-19.

_____. "Relating Theology and Science in a Postmodern Age." *Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences Bulletin* 7 (1987): 1-11.

Niekerk, Kees van Kooten. "A Critical Realist Perspective." In *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the current Dialogue*, ed. Niels H. Gregersen and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, 51-86. Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1998.

Okholm, Dennis L. "The Uneasy Evangelical." In *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Engagement: A Dynamic Engagement*, ed. Sung Wook Chung, 90-110. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

Packer, J. I. "An Introduction to Systematic Spirituality." *Crux* 36 (1990): 2-8.

Parker, James, III. "A Requiem for Postmodernism—Whither Now?" In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, 307-22. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.

Peacocke, Arthur. "Reflections on the Responses." In *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Philip Clayton, 176-90. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007.

Polkinghorne, John. "From Physicist to Priest." In *Science and Theology: The New Consonance*, ed. Ted Peters, 56-64. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998).

Porpora, Douglas V. "Judgmental Rationality and Jesus." In *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God*, 49-62. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

Ramsperger, A. G. "Critical Realism." In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Paul Edwards. New York: Macmillan, 1967.

Rehnman, Sebastian. "A Realist Conception of Revelation." In *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectiveson the Nature of Scripture*, ed. Paul Helm and Carl R. Truman, 253-72. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Schellenberg, J. L. "Religious Experience and Religious Diversity: A Reply to Alston."

In *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, 208-17. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Sellars, Roy Wood. "Critical Realism and Its Critics." *The Philosophical Review* 33 (1925): 379-97.

_____. "What Is the Correct Interpretation of Critical Realism?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1927): 238.

Shipway, Brad. "The Theological Application of Bhaskar's Stratified Reality: The Scientific Theology of A. E. McGrath." *Journal of Critical Realism* 3 (2004): 191-203.

Sproul, R.C. "The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit." In *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler, 335-54. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980.

Stibbs, Alan M. "The Witness of Scripture to its Inspiration." In *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry, 107-18. Grand Rapids, Baker, 1958.

Strickland, Wayne G. "Preunderstanding and Daniel Fuller's Law-Gospel Continuum." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (April 1987): 181-93.

Taylor, Justin. "An Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of This Book." In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, 17-32. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.

Thiselton, Anthony. "Hermeneutical Circle." In *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

Torrance, Thomas F. "The Transcendental Role of Wisdom in Science." In *Science et Sagesse: Entretiens de l'Académie Internationale de Philosophie des Sciences, 1990*, ed. Evandro Agazzi, 63-80. Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1991.

Van Engen, J. "Natural Theology." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Walter A. Elwell. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. "Introduction. " In *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

Wells, David F. "The Nature and Function of Theology." In *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnson, 175-99. Atlanta: John Knox, 1985.

Wellum, Stephen. "Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis." In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times,* ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, 161-97. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. "Entitled Christian Belief." In *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman, 95-104. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Dissertations

Brooks, Page Matthew. "A Comparison of Reactions to Postmodernity and its Influence on Theological Method in Works of Alister McGrath and Seyyed Hossein Nasr ." Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008.

Dew, James K., Jr. "Science as the *Ancilla Theologiae*: A Critical Assessment of Alister E. McGrath's Scientific Theology from an Evangelical Philosophical/Theological Perspective." Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008.

ABSTRACT

THEOLOGY AND REALITY:
CRITICAL REALISM IN THE THOUGHT
OF ALISTER E. MCGRATH

Brian Lee Goard, Ph.D.
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011
Chairperson: Dr. Gregg R. Allison

This dissertation examines the role of critical realism in the theological method of Alister E. McGrath. The thesis of the dissertation is that Alister McGrath uses critical realism in a way that strengthens his theological method and that serves a number of good theological ends, yet McGrath's methodology is in need of revision in some areas, and clarification in others, if it is going to be theologically acceptable.

Chapter 1 introduces (1) the philosophy of critical realism, (2) Alister McGrath's work in theological method, and (3) the thesis and methodology of the dissertation. Chapter 2 examines the history and development of critical realism, beginning with the work of Roy Wood Sellars in the early twentieth century and concluding with a description of critical realism as developed by Roy Bhaskar. Chapter 2 argues that historically, critical realism has been a versatile method that can be applied to a variety of projects and disciplines. Chapter 3 delineates the main themes of McGrath's methodology and how critical realism affects those areas. Specific points addressed in this chapter include McGrath's prolonged engagement with other theological methodologies (chief among them being postliberalism), the concept of nature, natural theology, and the science-theology dialogue. Chapter 4 provides a critical evaluation of McGrath's use of critical realism. A number of positive conclusions about McGrath's use of critical realism are drawn, yet where McGrath has made problematic or

underdeveloped applications of critical realism, both correction and suggestions for further development are offered. Finally, chapter 5 reviews the thesis of the dissertation and considers the method that has been taken in defense of that thesis. Specifically, it demonstrates how each of the previous chapters serve as evidence for the dissertation's thesis.

VITA

Brian Lee Goard

PERSONAL
        Born: July 10, 1974, Martinsville, Virginia
        Parents: Whudy Goard and Carol Gane
        Married: Kimberly Michelle Greer, July 10, 2001
        Children: Nicholas Brian-Luke Goard, born October 21, 2008

EDUCATIONAL
        Diploma, Bassett High School, Bassett, Virginia, 1992
        B.B.A., Operations Management, Radford University, Radford, Virginia, 1996
        M.A.R., Biblical Studies, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Lynchburg,
                Virginia, 2002
        M.Div., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Lynchburg, Virginia, 2002
        B.S., Philosophy and Religious Studies, Radford University, Radford,
                Virginia, 2004

MINISTERIAL
        Pastor, Palomar Baptist Church, Lexington, Kentucky, 2006-2008
        Interim Pastor, Grace Baptist Church, Ridgeway, Virginia, 2003-2004
        Interim Pastor, Axton Baptist Church, Axton, Virginia, 2001-2002

ACADEMIC
        Online Faculty, Theology, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia, 2006-
        Adjunct Faculty, Philosophy, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond,
                Kentucky, 2008-
        Adjunct Faculty, Philosophy, Patrick Henry Community College, Martinsville,
                Virginia, 2010-2011

ORGANIZATIONAL
        The Evangelical Theological Society
        Society of Christian Philosophers
        The Evangelical Philosophical Society