ANALYTIC THEOLOGY

New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology

Edited by
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For Mathilda Anais Crisp,
who has already shown herself to be 'mighty in battle'
and
For Christina Brinks Rea,
who came with gentleness and peace, and love in abundance.

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The Contribution of Religious Experience to Dogmatic Theology

Michael Sudduth

INTRODUCTION

Scripture is typically regarded as the primary if not exclusive source for Christian theology. Tradition, though, has often been considered a supplemental source for theological beliefs, or at least as constituting an important framework for the interpretation of the text of scripture, for example by imposing various constraints on its interpretation. While the phrase 'systematic theology' has traditionally been used to designate systematic reflection on the content of scripture, 'dogmatic theology' situates this reflection in the context of tradition, in organic connection with the life of the Church. Dogmatic theology refers to the examination and systematic development of dogmas, ecclesiastically formulated and sanctioned core theological beliefs ostensibly based on scripture.[1] In this way, dogmatic theology includes and makes explicit what might in principle otherwise be excluded from Christian theology, namely the present and past work of an ecclesiastical tradition.

In addition to divinely revealed truth about God provided in scripture and formalized in the creedal and confessional traditions of the Church, there are two other putative grounds for beliefs about God.[2] First, there is *natural theology.* Catholics and Protestants have traditionally recognized that there are some truths about God that may be known by the light of natural reason. Most Catholic theologians and many Protestant theologians have regarded

[1] The Council of Trent (1545–63) recognized both written (scriptural) and unwritten revelation, so some dogmas in post-Tridentine Catholic theology need not be based on scripture, though they must be compatible with the teachings of scripture. By contrast, Protestants have emphasized that scripture is the exclusive basis for Christian beliefs that have the status of dogma. Tradition functions in an ancillary fashion.

[2] In speaking of different grounds for beliefs about God, I don't intend to make the stronger claim that these grounds function *independently* of each other, much less that they ought to so function. Indeed, it is one of the important claims of this chapter that these grounds are inextricably linked to each other.

this natural knowledge of God as inferential and so as codified in various classical arguments for the existence and attributes of God. Secondly, there is *religious experience.* The theistic beliefs of many people are based on experiences in which it seems to them that God is present. They directly or indirectly perceive God or God's actions, rather than draw inferences about God from their experience. While such experiences may in turn provide material for natural theological reasoning, we should nonetheless distinguish between the two. Theistic beliefs based directly on religious experience are non-inferential or non-discursive, not the product of reasoning or argument.

In contemporary analytic philosophy of religion there has been considerable work on both natural theology and religious experience as epistemic grounds for beliefs about God, that is, as grounds capable of conferring justification or warrant on various beliefs about God. There has been less attention paid to how natural theology and religious experience relate to dogmatic theology. However, an analytic approach to theology should be able to relate these issues in the epistemology of belief in God to dogmatics, at least to assess their relevance to the project of dogmatic theology. I'll do precisely this in the present chapter. I will argue that natural theology, contrary to what we might initially suppose, has an important role to play within the system and discourse of dogmatic theology. We need not conceive of natural theology solely as a rational propaedeutic to the system of revealed theology, a kind of pre-dogmatic foundation for the faith. Rather, natural theology can contribute to goals internal to dogmatics itself, for example, the desiderata of systematicity and the explication of biblical doctrines. However, I will also argue that natural theology and religious experience are intertwined at different levels, so religious experience is also inextricably linked to dogmatic theology. I'll outline several of these links, some of which parallel the relationship between natural and dogmatic theology. My focus will be on dogmatic theology in the Protestant tradition, but several of my observations can be adopted by dogmatic theology in the Catholic and Greek Orthodox traditions.

NATURAL THEOLOGY AND DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

One of the goals of dogmatic theology is the development of a systematic doctrine of God and God's relation to the world. Natural theology, rational arguments for the existence and attributes of God, enters this picture in at least three, related ways. First, if God can be naturally known, this fact should be brought into dialogue with the knowledge of God given by way of scriptural revelation. If God is naturally knowable, this presupposes a more

general kind of revelation in the natural order of things and accessible in principle to human reason. A systematic account of God and God's relation to the world must consider the totality of the modes by which God reveals himself. Secondly, the text of scripture itself raises the possibility, if not actuality, of a natural knowledge of God based on a general revelation of God in the created order (Romans 1: 19–21; Psalm 19; Acts 14, 17). If so, the project of natural theology has biblical warrant at least indirectly,[3] and natural theology may be construed as an attempt to clarify and develop the scriptural testimony to general revelation and the natural knowledge of God. Finally, the development of a natural theology allows the Church to relate its confession and witness to the broader range of human life and society. It can thereby articulate how God relates himself to the world independent of the particularities of the Church's witness, as well as establish the unique value of the Church's witness in clarifying the nature and limits of general revelation. So natural theology would seem to be a necessary element within dogmatic theology by virtue of the latter's need for systematicity, explication of biblical doctrines, and Church–world dialogue.

While some Protestant theologians have rejected natural theology,[4] there has been a deeply entrenched and widespread endorsement of natural theology in the Protestant tradition, stretching back at least to the latter part of the sixteenth century. One of the interesting features of this endorsement has been its pluralism. Protestant theologians have endorsed different models of natural theology, different ways of thinking about the nature and function of theistic proofs, especially in relation to dogmatics. This is particularly true in the Reformed or Calvinistic streams of the Protestant tradition, where objections to natural theology have been prominent since the latter part of the nineteenth century. These so-called 'Reformed objections' to natural theology must be interpreted in the larger context of the tradition's pluralistic dialogue on natural theology.[5] For our present purposes, this pluralism provides

[3] For a detailed development of this argument, see James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[4] e.g. Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, G. C. Berkouwer, and conservative Calvinists such as Herman Hoeksema and Gordon Clark. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the rejection of natural theology was typically linked to pietism or reactions to the 'natural religion' of the deists. For the latter, see John Ellis, *The Knowledge of Divine Things from Revelation not from Reason or Nature* (London, 1743) and William Irons, *On the Whole Doctrine of Final Causes* (London, 1836). In the 19th and 20th centuries it has been philosophically motivated primarily by the influence of Immanuel Kant's critique of natural theology and theologically inspired by Catholic–Protestant polemics. See Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), chs. 2 and 3.

[5] Viewed in this light, many so-called Reformed objections to natural theology turn out to be more modest than they first appear, typically targeting particular models of natural theology rather than the project of natural theology itself. I argue this in detail in my *Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (forthcoming, Ashgate).

insight into different ways of developing the preliminary suggestions above and thereby showing the necessity of natural theology to dogmatic theology.

Conceptions of Natural Theology in the Protestant Tradition

It is now widely accepted that the presentation of arguments for the existence and nature of God first unambiguously appear in the Protestant tradition in Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* (1535, 1543–4) and *Commentary on Romans* (1532, 1540). In the latter they appear as an elaboration and development of Romans 1: 19–21: 'For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse' (NRSV). In the former they appear under the heading *de creatione*, a biblically based discussion of creation. In each case, it is clear that theistic arguments are directed to the Christian as a means of rationally reflecting on the data of biblical revelation. Melanchthon develops theistic arguments in the course of articulating aspects of revealed or biblical theology, with the stated goal of strengthening the Christian's knowledge of God.[6] There is a natural theology here embedded in the larger context of revealed theology, but no attempt to construct a theology of God based solely on reason and then use it as a gateway to dogmatic theology.

In sixteenth- and many seventeenth-century Protestant dogmatic systems theistic arguments were typically presented under theological prolegomena or the *locus de Deo*,[7] the former being a discussion of the principles and presuppositions of dogmatic theology and the latter being a discussion of the existence and attributes of God. Within the setting of early Protestant scholasticism, neither theological prolegomena nor the *locus de Deo* was predogmatic in nature. Each exhibited a dependence on and integration with scripture and the correlated Christian doctrine of God, even where the dogmatic system begins with the *locus de Deo*. This explains the reliance on scripture in the *locus de Deo*, as is illustrated in the use of the 'divine names' derived from scripture as a point of departure for articulating and systematizing the divine attributes.[8] It also explains the inclusion of the doctrine of

[6] See John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: The Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982), ch. 2.

[7] For a detailed discussion of theistic proofs in Reformed scholasticism, see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), iii. 48–52, 153–95. See also my *Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (forthcoming, Ashgate), ch. 1.

[8] Ibid. 254–72.

the Trinity under the *locus de Deo*,[9] even though the Trinity is not an aspect of natural theology for these Protestant thinkers. In some instances the *locus de scriptura* is prior to the *locus de Deo*[10] so it is clear that the doctrine of God rests on scriptural revelation as its foundation, not reason. In these early dogmatic systems, we find no independent *locus* on natural theology, either within or prefaced to the theological system. Rational arguments for the existence and nature of God are situated in the larger context of the exposition of the contents of revealed theology.

By contrast, when we examine theistic proofs in many of the Protestant dogmatic systems of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we find natural theology presented as a pre-dogmatic, rational foundation for the faith.[11] Under the influence of Cartesianism and Wolffian rationalism, natural theology was transformed into a purely rational discourse on the divine existence and attributes, separated from scripture and designed to prepare the way for the system of revealed theology. The nineteenth century inherited this pre-dogmatic conception of natural theology, which arguably reached its culmination in the famous Gifford Lectures established by Lord Gifford in 1888. Gifford's goal was to provide a platform for a purely scientific or rational treatment of the existence and nature of God, independent of any claims originating from an ostensible divine revelation. This pre-dogmatic conception of natural theology represents a significant departure from the earlier Protestant scholastics.

To be sure, we do find an apologetic use of theistic arguments among the earlier Protestant scholastics, ostensibly an illustration of the Church–world dialogue I mentioned above. However, in this context theistic arguments are not used to *establish* either theism or the Christian faith but simply to *refute* atheists and remove objections to the faith within the larger logical architecture of revealed theology. Francis Turretin and Edward Leigh, for example, both used theistic proofs to refute atheists, but these arguments appear subsequent to the doctrine of scripture under a biblically informed doctrine of God. This is, of course, entirely consistent with the instrumental use of reason in dogmatic theology.[12] There is a reasoned defense of the faith *within*

[9] e.g. Hyperius, *Methodus theologiae* (1568); Musculus, *Loci communes* (1560); Daneau, *Christianae isogoges* (1583); Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (Geneva, 1679–85).

[10] e.g. Polansdorf, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Geneva, 1617), Edward Leigh, *Body of Divinity* (London, 1654), and Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (Geneva, 1679–85).

[11] e.g. Salomon van Til, *Theologiae utriusque compendium* (Leiden, 1704, 1719), I. i–iii, II. i–iii; Johann Friedrich Stapfer, *Institutiones theologiae polemicae universae, ordine scientifico dispositae*, 4th edn., 5 vols. (Zurich, 1756–7); Daniel Wyttenbach, *Tentamen theologiae dogmaticae methodo scientifico pertractatae*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt, 1747–9). For further discussion, see Muller, *Post-Reformation*, i. 305–8, iii. 121–9, 141–50, 193–5.

[12] What I'm designating the 'instrumental' use of reason is roughly equivalent to what Oliver Crisp, in Chapter 1, refers to as the 'procedural' use of reason.

the system of dogmatic theology but no apologetically motivated theological prolegomenon in which natural theology is used to lay the foundations for subsequent claims about God derived from scripture. The scientific or reflective elaboration of the faith may require the refutation of various objections to the faith, but the *principium* of dogmatics remains scripture, not reason.

The Justification of the Instrumental Role of Reason

There are interesting parallels between the Protestant dogmatic conception of natural theology and Thomas Aquinas's demonstrations of the existence of God as they occur in Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*.[13] In neither do we find natural theology functioning as a rational foundation for revealed theology. The *Summa* does not begin with the Five Ways. The proofs are actually placed subsequent to Aquinas's initial discussion on the nature and domain of sacred doctrine. When the proofs occur (in the *prima pars*, question 2), they actually presuppose scripture, in much the same way that the theistic proofs do in many Protestant dogmatic systems. There is no attempt to begin with any natural theology, nor does Thomas move from a purely rational knowledge of God based on reason to a revealed knowledge of God based on scripture. Like the earlier Protestant scholastics, Aquinas's doctrine of God is biblically informed.[14] Of course, Aquinas's concern in the *prima pars*, question 2 of the *Summa* is not to prove the existence of God over against atheist denials of the existence of God, but to prove the demonstrability of the existence of God over against *religious* denials that God's existence can be demonstrated. The proofs are an answer to fideistic tendencies internal to the Christian tradition.

The use of the proofs to refute fideism is closely tied to Aquinas's prior concern in the *prima pars* (question 1, article 8) whether sacred doctrine is argumentative. From this vantage point we can see the demonstration of the existence of God as a way of exploring the nature of our knowledge of God and the possibility of a theological discourse in which there is a reasoned exploration and elucidation of the articles of faith. But this is for the sake of the Christian. The proofs provide reason to believe that reason itself can enter into the theological realm and elucidate the articles of faith.

[13] See Muller, *Post-Reformation*, iii. 153–9; Muller, 'The Dogmatic Function of the St. Thomas' "Proofs": A Protestant Appreciation', *Fides et Historia*, 24/2 (Summer 1992), 15–29. I am indebted to Muller for much of the argument in this section of the chapter.

[14] Stanley Hauerwas has recently emphasized the faith-context of Aquinas's five ways. See Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2001), ch. 1. See also G. de Broglie, 'La Vraie Notion thomiste des "praeambula fidei"', *Gregorianum*, 34 (1953), 349–89.

There is no need to establish the existence of God within the framework of the dogmatic system, for dogmatics already presupposes the existence of God. There *is* a need, however, to establish the instrumental validity of reason for theology, to show that it is fit for the task of being the handmaiden of sacred doctrine. Viewed in this light, while the proofs are intended as genuine logical demonstrations of God's existence, they are not foundations upon which revealed theology is built. They provide the Christian with a justification of the instrumental role of reason for the sake of the dogmatic elaboration of the articles of faith.[15]

While the apologetic and pre-dogmatic conceptions of natural theology may be legitimate ways of thinking about natural theology and its connection to dogmatic theology, it is equally important to see natural theology as a project internal to the discourse of dogmatics itself, as an intellectual activity arising from conceptual needs internal to dogmatics and the more general desideratum of faith seeking understanding. From this vantage point, the development of a systematic doctrine of God based on scripture and the rational justification of reason's ability to accomplish this task become deeply intertwined, but they do so as elements within not foundational to dogmatics.

NATURAL THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Where does religious experience factor into this picture and how does it ultimately relate to dogmatic theology? One of the connections here is indirect and depends on a particular relationship between natural theology and religious experience. We must examine this first and then consider its implications for relating religious experience to dogmatic theology.

The Nature of Religious Experience

One tendency, particularly prominent in post-Kantian liberal Protestant thought, has been to construe religious experience as non-cognitive in nature. On this view, religious experience does not place the cognizer in possession of any truth about God. Hence, religious experience isn't a source of knowledge of God. It is a feeling or some other affective state of the subject. On this view, religious experience stands in sharp contrast to natural theology. Whereas natural theology ostensibly informs us about the ultimate metaphysical

[15] Muller, 'Dogmatic Function', 24.

furniture of the world, religious experience functions as a source of moral and spiritual transformation. The reflective examination of religious experience informs us about theological doctrines, not as true or false, but as vehicles of piety and personal transformation.[16] If, on this view, we see religious experience as a ground for truths of any sort, it is solely truths about human nature and experience, not divine realities.[17] The psychology of human belief in God replaces theology. It is this understanding of religious experience that has been responsible for the widespread skepticism among conservative Protestants towards the integration of religious experience and dogmatic theology. The fear has been that dogmatic theology may turn out to be neither dogmatic nor theology.[18]

Of course, plenty of theologians and philosophers have maintained that religious experience is cognitive, that it can inform us about divine realities. Cognitive accounts of religious experience have been one of the important developments in contemporary philosophy of religion since the second half of the twentieth century. Some thinkers have held that religious experience involves an intuitive perception of God's presence that generically resembles our intuitive perception of other minds.[19] Others have focused on a class of religious experiences characterized as non-sensory perceptual experiences of God, generically resembling our sensory perceptual experiences of the physical world.[20] Some have taken religious experience to be a perceptual experience in a fairly broad sense: it seeming to the person that God is present, where this may or may not be mediated by something sensory.[21] Of course,

[16] See Ch. 6 above, by Andrew Dole.

[17] See T. R. Miles, *Religious Experience* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

[18] e.g. the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck wrote: 'In many schools of theology, there is a tendency to replace all transcendent-metaphysical statements about God, his essence and attributes, his words and works, with descriptions of Christian experience and its content.' Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics; Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 2003), i. 48; cf. pp. 106–7, 165–6. See also Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th edn. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984), 19–20, and B. B. Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 10 vols. (1932; repr., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 2000), ix. 55–8.

[19] John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 166–77, 207–18.

[20] See John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), ch. 7; William Wainwright, 'Mysticism and Sense Perception', *Religious Studies*, 9 (1973), 257–78; Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[21] Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), ch. 13. Two clarifications. First, 'seems' here is epistemic and refers to what the cognizer is inclined to believe on the basis of her present experience. This is usually contrasted with the non-epistemic use of 'seems' that involves a comparison of an object with other objects. It seems to me (in the comparative sense) that the stick in the water is bent because it looks the way bent things look, but it won't seem bent to me (in the epistemic sense) if I'm not inclined to believe that the stick

others have regarded religious experience as an experience the subject interprets as religious, that is, a mundane experience the subject merely takes to be caused by God.[22] On the perceptual views, religious experience can directly be a source of warranted beliefs about God, so at least some theistic beliefs can be immediately warranted. Their warrant does not (entirely) depend on the subject's other warranted beliefs. On the interpretive view, religious experience can be epistemically efficacious only if the subject's interpretive beliefs about the cause of her experience are warranted. In this case, religious experience cannot directly confer warrant on beliefs about God.

For our present purposes, I'll adopt the view that at least some religious experiences ground immediately warranted beliefs about God, so that the interpretive view of religious experience is at best only part of the story of the nature of religious experience. I will, however, note the implications of the interpretive view for aspects of my argument in what follows. Furthermore, I take the perceptual model to provide an account of a broad range of experiences from extra-ordinary mystical experiences of union with God to the more regular perception of God in the workings of nature and in one's daily devotional life. In some of these experiences God is directly perceived, whereas in others he is indirectly perceived through the perception of something else (e.g. the beauties of nature, the hearing of the words of scripture, miraculous events).

Natural theology and perceptual models of religious experience have an important common ground. They are both cognitive models. Each proposes a source of beliefs about God that potentially gives us knowledge of the ultimate metaphysical furniture of the universe. Nonetheless, an important difference remains. Religious experience would be a source of *immediately* warranted beliefs (or knowledge) about God, whereas natural theology would be a source of *inferentially* warranted beliefs (or knowledge) about God. The distinction is analogous to the difference between forming the belief that it is raining outside because one sees the rain falling, and forming the belief that it is raining outside because one has inferred this from other bits of knowledge (e.g. the weather channel predicted rain today, the sound of pitter-patter on the roof, and someone has just walked in the house with a dripping wet

is bent. I might lack this inclination, for example, because I know the appearance is an optical illusion. Secondly, where religious experience is mediated by something sensory, Swinburne distinguishes between religious experiences mediated by publicly observable phenomena and those that are mediated by sensations private to the individual. In the former, the phenomena may be ordinary or extra-ordinary. In the latter, the sensory states private to the individual may or may not be describable by ordinary vocabulary.

[22] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1985).

umbrella). This distinction naturally raises the question as to how, if at all, these two putative sources of warranted theistic belief positively interact with each other.

The Positive Interface between Natural Theology and Religious Experience

Despite their distinctness, there is an important positive interface between religious experience and natural theology, which will in turn be important to assessing the relationship between religious experience and dogmatic theology.

First, we need not suppose that religious experience confers maximal warrant on theistic belief, so inference can always, at least in principle, *add* warrant to theistic beliefs that receive some warrant directly from religious experience. This may be particularly important in cases where the warrant provided by religious experience isn't sufficient to transform true belief into knowledge. Inference can make the difference between warranted true beliefs and knowledge.[23] Moreover, even where theistic beliefs grounded in religious experience have an initially high degree of warrant (enough for knowledge) this degree of warrant may be subsequently reduced, for instance as the result of acquiring a defeater against theistic belief.[24] The positive epistemic status of religious beliefs is defeasible. It is subject to being overridden by reasons for supposing that God doesn't exist or reasons for supposing that some ground of theistic belief is unreliable. The warrant of theistic belief based on religious experience could be defeated in either way, but independent reasons for supposing that God exists could defeat defeaters in these circumstances and allow theistic belief to remain warranted, even to continue receiving warrant from religious experience.

Secondly, it seems implausible to suppose that just *any* kind of belief about God could be directly warranted by religious experience. In that case, perhaps inference can confer warrant on theistic beliefs that are not supported by

[23] I assume that knowledge entails a strongly warranted true belief, even if knowledge requires the satisfaction of some further condition, e.g. to handle so-called Gettier counter-examples.

[24] I am thinking of defeaters here as items internal to the cognizer (in the form of the cognizer's experiences or other beliefs) that eliminate warrant or reduce a belief's degree of warrant. In some epistemological theories, defeaters are conditions external to the cognizer (e.g. in the form of some true proposition) that prevent a sufficiently justified true belief from counting as knowledge. For further discussion on defeaters in connection with religious belief, see my 'Proper Basicality and the Evidential Significance of Internalist Defeat: A Proposal for Revising Classical Evidentialism', in Godehard Bruntrup and Ronald Tacelli (eds.), *The Rationality of Theism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 215–36.

religious experience. Granted, it is difficult to spell out limits on how God may be experienced, but particular conceptions of religious experience would seem to suggest boundaries of some sort. For example, if we suppose that religious experience involves a direct presentation of God to our experience, it is doubtful that God will present himself in the totality of his being at any given time. And even where God presents himself to us as φ (some particular divine attribute), theism may wish to say more about φ than is underwritten by the experience. God may present himself to our experience as good or powerful, but not as a being with *unlimited* goodness or power. However, these kinds of beliefs can be the product of rational inferences. In fact, they are typically part of the package of natural theology. So inference may help fill out the content of experientially grounded theistic beliefs. Also, ostensible perceptions of God (indirect and direct) would seem to depend on a set of background beliefs that allow the individual to identify what is being experienced as God. These background beliefs may at least in part be built up from the resources of natural theology.[25]

These first two points highlight ways in which inference can make contributions to the natural knowledge of God even if religious experience is epistemically efficacious. But religious experience seems capable of making its own important contributions here.

First, while religious experience may be a source of immediately warranted beliefs about God, the fact that people have religious experiences can function as a datum for the arguments of natural theology. This is precisely what has been done in the so-called argument from religious experience, roughly, arguments that contend that the facts of religious experience constitute at least prima facie evidence for certain theistic beliefs.[26] The argument from religious experience has often been combined with other arguments for the existence of God in a cumulative case approach to proving God's existence. On this view, religious experience functions as an empirical datum along with the existence of the universe, its temporal and spatial regularities, and so forth. It is then argued that the existence of God (understood in a robust theistic sense) provides the best explanation for these empirical data taken collectively. The data of religious experience are arguably of considerable importance in supporting divine attributes established by other theistic arguments (e.g. divine power, goodness) and those not so obviously established (e.g. divine love). Considerations from religious experience could also

[25] William Alston develops the points raised in the prior two paragraphs in some detail: *Perceiving God*, ch. 8.

[26] C. D. Broad, *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1930); Swinburne, *Existence of God*, ch. 13; Gutting, *Religious Belief*; Carolyn Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (New York: OUP, 1989).

provide support for other theistic doctrines (e.g. sanctification) some of which have traditionally been linked to the domain of natural religion and rational argument (e.g. an afterlife).[27] So this particular use of religious experience would seem to be of considerable importance to a well-developed natural theology.

Secondly, religious experience, if a source of warranted belief in God, would provide warrant for very different kinds of theistic beliefs than the kind of theistic beliefs that are underwritten by the arguments of natural theology. Religious experience often functions as a ground for the formation of beliefs about specific divine actions towards oneself at a particular time, for example, that God is now forgiving me (for some wrong doing), God is guiding me (in some particular decision-making process), or that God comforting me (in the aftermath of some particular tragedy). These are not the kinds of claims natural theology establishes, even where natural theology incorporates material from the data of religious experience. It is one thing to appeal to the religious experiences of other people as evidence that God exists and is active in the lives of people, quite another to be aware of God's presence and activity in one's *own* life at some particular time.[28] So religious experience can make a unique contribution to the knowledge of God, even where we grant inference an epistemically significant role.

Finally, one of the common criticisms of theistic arguments is that these arguments are not strong and so do not confer a significant degree of warrant on theistic beliefs. However, the consequences of this for the epistemology of belief in God are less dire if we recognize that theistic belief receives significant warrant from religious experience, for in that case inference need not bear a heavy epistemic burden. The proper role of inference will be to add weight to and fill out theistic beliefs warranted on grounds other than inference. Rather than being an attempt at proving the existence of God *de novo*, natural theology will be a way in which religious persons confirm and reflectively develop an antecedent belief in God. Perhaps more controversially, the actual force of theistic arguments may be affected by the presence or absence of a background of religious experience. The force of inductive theistic arguments depends in part on the antecedent probability of theism, but this probability is affected by the totality of our experience. It would seem to be higher for those who have experienced God than for those who have not. Arguably then religious experience not only strengthens the conclusions of natural theology,

[27] Near death experiences, e.g., if they involve a perception of some divine reality (as many do) count as religious experiences, but they potentially provide evidence for post-mortem survival.

[28] With the assistance of tradition or scripture, one may *infer* that God is at work in one's life, or more specific propositions such as God loves me or God forgives me. See below for a further discussion.

but it might make possible whatever epistemic efficacy the arguments of natural theology possess.

DOGMATIC THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Religious experience and rational inference, then, appear to be interdependent sources of knowledge of God. However, here I wish to emphasize one facet of this interdependence suggested above, namely that religious experience seems to be necessary to the project of natural theology in at least two related ways. (i) The data of religious experience, though not necessary to the content and structure of some particular theistic arguments, is essential to the overall project of natural theology. A robust or sufficiently developed natural theology will, in the interest of systematicity, integrate all aspects of general revelation. Moreover, as argued above, natural theology without the data of religious experience is likely to lose something in the way of the cumulative force of its arguments, its ability to suitably establish particular divine attributes, and its ability to integrate other theistic doctrines. (ii) Theistic arguments (with or without integrating data from religious experience) are epistemically efficacious for some people only because they have had some religious experience(s). According to (ii) it is the *fact* of religious experience that is necessary for the epistemic efficacy of natural theology for some persons, whereas according to (i) it is the *reflective use* of the facts of religious experience that is necessary for a robust form of natural theology.

In the first section I argued that natural theology is necessary to dogmatic theology, but the implication of the argument in the second section is—as just outlined—that religious experience is necessary to natural theology. It follows that religious experience is necessary to dogmatic theology. If dogmatic theology were to make use of the resources of natural theology, for any of the reasons noted earlier, it will invariably find itself making use of the resources of religious experience in the ways suggested by (i) or (ii). The argument here is of course indirect. It can be supplemented with a more direct engagement of the relationship between religious experience and dogmatic theology.

The Contribution of Dogmatic Theology to Religious Experience

From the perspective of the subject having a religious experience, the precise character of a religious experience is strongly dependent on the subject's

broader set of beliefs about God, many of which will be derived from dogmatic theology. This is obviously true in the case of interpretive accounts of religious experience, but it is equally true in the case of perceptual models of religious experience. As in the case of sensory perceptual beliefs, object identification and property attribution are shaped by our background beliefs. The point was made earlier in connection with natural theology, but it would seem to be of greater significance here for two reasons.

First, dogmatic theology is likely to exert a greater influence on the beliefs of ordinary believers than natural theology. The content of dogmatic theology is communicated to ordinary believers through the communal life of the Church, its creeds and catechisms, and pulpit sermons, all of wider appeal to the practice of religion than works devoted to the philosophical elucidation of the faith. Where natural theology has influence, it tends to be through the fairly indirect route of its influence on dogmatic theology. Consider, for example, the influence of Greek natural theology on the concept of God in various systems of dogmatic theology and their articulation in the confessions of the Church. To take a Calvinistic example, the Westminster Confession of Faith claims 'there is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute'.[29] While the confession provides scriptural references for each of these attributions, the confession reflects a tradition of natural theological reflection embodied in Protestant scholasticism and which stretches back to medieval philosophy.

Secondly, unlike the traditional arguments of natural theology, dogmatic theology provides a detailed narrative of God's interactions with humans. It thereby informs us about the conditions under which people have genuinely experienced God (e.g. conversion, prayer, meditation), the character of these experiences, how they may be induced, and an account of their moral and spiritual fruits. While this is far from giving us a recipe of experiencing God, it is relevant to certain expectations about God's interaction with humans. Moreover, it at least provides criteria for distinguishing genuine religious experiences from spurious ones. Most religious traditions recognize that there are 'counterfeit' religious experiences,[30] whether induced by cognitive disorders or malevolent spiritual forces at work in the world. Consequently, claims to perceiving God have historically been tested for consistency with Christian doctrine and paradigmatic religious experiences of saints and other

[29] *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 2: 1.

[30] An excellent Protestant illustration of this is found in Jonathan Edwards's discussion of religious experience in his *Treatise on the Religious Affections* (1746).

believers in the history of the Church. So the practice of forming beliefs about God on the basis of religious experience operates with distinctive testing and checking procedures.[31]

It is important to add here that the presence of testing and checking procedures for religious experience is an important point of similarity between sense perception and religious experience. This similarity strengthens the case for supposing that religious experience can be a source of warranted religious belief, for we might suppose that sense perception is a source of warranted beliefs about physical objects only if specific sensory perceptual experiences and the beliefs they engender are subject to various testing and checking procedures, as in fact they are. At any rate, the alleged absence of any testing procedures for religious experiences is often raised as an objection to treating religious experience as sufficiently like sensory perceptual experience. However, the point here is that dogmatic theology (along with natural theology) provides significant input to the larger belief framework in which religious experiences are situated and over against which their deliverances may be tested. In that case, though, dogmatic theology makes an important contribution to the epistemology of religious experience.

The argument from religious experience is, if evidence for the existence of God, evidence of divine–human interaction. So there is a sense in which natural theology can provide us with a generic narrative of the sort I have attributed to dogmatic theology above. But the raw data from ostensible religious experiences makes up a very large collection of experiences, many of which engender incompatible beliefs about the divine, even within the same religious tradition. If reason alone must navigate these waters, it is usually at the expense of the particularities of many of the experiences or the ramified nature of the beliefs allegedly grounded in such experiences. The evidential value of such experiences (outside the context of dogmatic theology) usually requires trimming away many of the details that render these experiences most significant for the believer.[32] Arguably, then, there is a need for a tradition-specific normative guide to religious experience, and dogmatic theology provides this, and in such a way that it is easily accessible to ordinary believers.

[31] For further discussion of the nature and ramifications of testing and checking procedures for religious experience, see Alston, *Perceiving God*, 209–22, Wainwright, 'Mysticism', and Davis, *Evidential Force*, 70–7.

[32] Carolyn Franks Davis argues that the 'conflicting claims challenge' cannot defeat the evidential force of religious experience if the latter is taken only to support theistic beliefs of a very low level of ramification. While Davis says that the introduction of evidential considerations beyond religious experience can result in evidential support for more highly ramified theistic beliefs, it is doubtful this can be effective in the absence of a reliance on tradition-specific doctrines. See Davis, *Evidential Force*, chs. 7 and 9.

The Contribution of Religious Experience to Dogmatic Theology

As with natural theology, dogmatic theology not only shapes but is also shaped by religious experience. Here I'll consider four salient contributions of religious experience to dogmatic theology.

There is first what we might designate the *genesis factor*. Historically, religious experiences have made dogmatic theology possible. Dogmatic theology involves a systematic reflection on the data of scripture, but scripture is in large part a record of religious experiences ostensibly involving the communication of divine truths. In this way, much of the content of dogmatic theology originates ultimately from the religious experiences of central figures in biblical history. What would dogmatic theology be without the voice of God calling to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees, God speaking to Moses from the burning bush, or Saul of Tarsus's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus? Not only would we be missing testimony to particular interactions between the human and divine but we would be missing the distinctive doctrines that have emerged historically from such interactions. We would also be missing the vitality of religious consciousness that inspires the rise of theological doctrines and formulae. As William James said: 'In one sense at least the personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism. Churches, when once established, live second-hand upon tradition; but the founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine.'[33]

Second, there is the *confirmation factor*. Religious experience and its data confirm some of the essential content of dogmatic theology, most generally the personal nature of the divine being and the fact of divine–human interaction. While the traditional arguments of natural theology confirm some essential features of dogmatic theology (e.g. the existence and natural attributes of God), the appeal to religious experience permits a confirmation of the fact that God reveals himself in concrete historical events and individual human lives, which is precisely what dogmatic theology affirms and would lead us to expect. While dogmatic theology does not lead us to expect that every purported experience of God will be genuine, it does lead us to expect that there would be experiences of the sort that humans have reported throughout history.[34]

[33] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 35.

[34] Arguably, some systems of dogmatic theology would also lead us to expect counterfeits of such experiences, whether as the product of the noetic effects of sin or the activity of some malevolent spiritual agents. These systems would lead us to expect conflicting claims arising from ostensible religious experiences.

Third, there is the *explication* factor. Reflection on the phenomenon of religious experience within dogmatic theology is not merely an activity of rational confirmation of elements of the dogmatic system but it is, perhaps more importantly, a means of rationally explicating the content of biblical theology itself. Earlier I argued that natural theology is important to dogmatic theology since it helps explicate and develop the biblical testimony to general revelation and the natural knowledge of God. But many kinds of religious experiences arguably ground a natural knowledge of God. At any rate, this is true within the Protestant tradition, where theologians have recognized that, in addition to the knowledge of God that can be acquired inferentially from features of the natural world, there is an intuitive knowledge of God that arises spontaneously with mental maturation and experience of the world. The intuitive knowledge of God includes the more ordinary kinds of religious experiences, for example, the experience of God in the beauties or providences of nature. Both kinds of knowledge of God (inferential and intuitive) are natural and testify to God's general revelation of himself in the created order and natural constitution of the human person. The relevant point here is that reflection on some religious experiences constitutes reflection on the intuitive natural knowledge of God. Religious experience and natural theology are once again intertwined.

Of course many religious experiences transcend the natural order of things, and so do not amount to natural grounds for belief in God. This seems to be the case with certain paradigm cases of extra-ordinary religious experiences provided in the biblical narrative, for instance, Moses' experiences at the burning bush and the receiving of the law on Mt Sinai, or Saul of Tarsus's experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Scripture recognizes more extra-ordinary modes of self-revelation that appear to be supernatural (e.g. by way of dreams, visions, theophanies, angelic manifestations). Protestants of course disagree about whether such modes of revelation continue in the present day, and if so the extent and centrality of such revelations. However, Protestants agree about the continuing indwelling and testimony of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individual believers. The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin, sense of forgiveness, awareness of conversion, and persuasion of the truth of the Christian gospel. These are religious experiences that produce convictions about God and the human person's relation to God, but they are supernaturally induced experiences according to Protestant dogmatics. Hence, reflection on some religious experiences, while not an aspect of natural theology, would amount to an explication of God's more extra-ordinary ways of revealing himself in the economy of individual salvation.

Finally, there is the *reality factor*. On a realist conception of perceptual experience, it is God himself who is directly known in the perceptual experience of God, in much the same way that physical objects are directly known by way of sensory perceptual experience. Now physical science surely shapes many of the details of our experience of the physical world, but science emerges and is sustained as a reflective activity on the realities given to us by way of sense perception. In much the same way, while dogmatic theology shapes the experience of God in the ways I earlier suggested, the experience of God gives the fundamental realities about which dogmatic theology reflects and speaks. Dogmatic theology is rational discourse about God that is dependent on personal contact and interaction with the divine being, both in the collective and individual sense.

We can of course *infer* the personal presence and activity of God in our lives from criteria of this presence and activity given by dogmatic theology. I can infer that God forgives me by perceiving the satisfaction of certain conditions of forgiveness in my life. I can infer that God is sanctifying me from divine promises in scripture and my experiential awareness of spiritual fruit in my life. I can infer that God loves me from what scripture says about God and God's relationship to the world. But inferring that God forgives or loves me is fundamentally different than experiencing divine forgiveness or love itself. In much the same way, I can infer that my friend loves or forgives me, but I can also experience this love and forgiveness through our personal interactions, an experience through which the bonds of friendship are strengthened. Something similar needs to be said about the human–divine relationship. The experiential awareness of God is arguably essential to the personal relationship between God and individual human persons, a relationship about which dogmatic theology speaks. The absence of this experiential dimension would certainly change the theologian's approach to dogmatic theology itself. Perhaps it would degenerate into a deistic system of rational theology or a theology disconnected from the interests and experiences of the Church.

As in the case of natural theology, the dogmatic goals of systematicity and the explication of the biblical doctrine of general revelation play an important role in justifying the integration of religious experience and dogmatic theology. In this regard, it is important to note the position of the great conservative Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield. According to Warfield, although we cannot construct any complete system of theology from the data of Christian religious experience, it is quite legitimate for the dogmatician to draw inferences from Christian experience and to incorporate these into dogmatic theology. He said, 'the data of the theology of the feelings, no less than of natural theology, when their results are validly obtained and sufficiently authenticated as trustworthy, as divinely revealed facts . . . must

be wrought into our system'.[35] However, these inferences must be subject to the doctrinal constraints of scripture, as well as confirmed and supplemented by the teachings of scripture. Warfield understood that the aim of systematicity requires the dogmatic treatment of religious experience, but we can only avoid subjectivist and rationalist distortions of this treatment if scripture remains the *principium* of theological inquiry.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I have explored the interrelated contributions of natural theology and religious experience to dogmatic theology. I examined the functional diversity of natural theology, which I argued gives us good reason to view natural theology as an essential part of the discourse of dogmatic theology itself as the latter reaches toward the desiderata of systematicity, explication of biblical motifs concerning general revelation, and Church–world dialogue. I subsequently argued, though, that natural theology and religious experience are conceptually and epistemically intertwined to such a degree that any attempt to integrate natural and dogmatic theology forces the dogmatician to consider the nature and deliverances of religious experience. The more conservative streams of Protestant theology have tended to look at religious experience with a high degree of suspicion for fear of dogmatic theology degenerating into subjectivism or a psychology of religion in which the metaphysical claims of Christianity are lost or substantially trimmed down. However, cognitive accounts of religious experience would seem to help avoid this pitfall, especially if (like natural theology) reflections on religious experience take place within the system of dogmatic theology, not as an autonomous system of rational thought prefaced to dogmatic theology.[36]

[35] Warfield, 'Idea of Systematic Theology', 62–3.
[36] I wish to thank Michael Rea for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

11

Science and Religion in Constructive Engagement

Michael J. Murray

In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* Thomas Aquinas characterized faith as consisting of beliefs held on the basis of authority rather than on the basis of the evidence of the senses and what can be inferred from that evidence.[1] This view of faith was not new to Christian theology, nor was it the predominant position it later became. However, in demarcating the domains of faith and reason in this way, St Thomas set the stage for establishing the possibility of genuine conflicts between them. And since authoritative religious teaching pronounces on so many things, the emergence of conflict was nearly inevitable.

Of course, St Thomas was convinced that the God who created the world and inspired the Bible would not permit the authoritative teachings to conflict with a proper understanding of the empirical data. For him,

> The natural dictates of reason must certainly be quite true: it is impossible to think of their being otherwise. Nor is it permissible to believe that the tenets of faith are false, being so evidently confirmed by God. Since therefore falsehood is contrary to truth, it is impossible for the truth of faith to be contrary to principles known by natural reason.[2]

Nonetheless, even if Thomas and his followers were convinced that, at the end of the day, the 'dictates of reason' and the 'tenets of faith' would be consistent, it was not at all clear, as later disputes between science and religion would show, when the end of the day had been reached. If and when conflict arises, which should yield?

Most academic theologians and philosophers interested in the historical relationship between science and religion are well aware of a few celebrated incidents in which, so we have been told, seemingly bull-headed theologians resisted the clear light of scientific reason and evidence and clung fast to theological 'orthodoxy', only later to be embarrassed when the evidence against them became painfully inescapable. What these incidents are supposed to

[1] Bk 1, c. 3. [2] Bk 1, c. 7.