

## PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

J. A. DiNOIA, O.P.

*Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D.C.*

RICHARD RORTY commends a philosophical style which "says things like 'try thinking of it this way' or 'try to ignore apparently traditional questions; substitute the following new and possibly more interesting questions.' It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke the old way. Rather, it suggests that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else."<sup>1</sup> Rorty's advice is echoed in the writings of current philosophers of every stripe as they follow the course beyond modernity charted earlier by Wittgenstein and Heidegger.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I shall try to put this good advice to theological use. But I shall not espouse the hermeneutical, neopragmatist, or deconstructionist programs with which it is associated. The linguistic turn maps as slippery a path for postmodern theology as the subjective turn did for modern theology.<sup>3</sup> Following Rorty's advice in part, however, I shall argue here that Christian theology should turn from the agenda defined for it by philosophers since the Enlightenment and substitute a fresh agenda—not one posed by postmodern philosophy but one at least in part suggested by the conversation with major world religions now gathering momentum. I shall argue that this fresh agenda is likely to prove more congenial to the interests of Christian affirmation particularly as these are served by what is misleadingly called "philosophical theology" or "natural theology." After a brief sketch of the contours of the new conversation, I shall present an analysis of the logical structure of arguments in philosophical theology. I shall then field an interpretation of the contemporary theological scene viewed in the perspective of the history of the debate about such arguments which philosophical criticism

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of Language," *London Review of Books*, April 17, 1986, 4.

<sup>2</sup> See the essays collected in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, eds., *After Philosophy? End or Transformation* (Cambridge: MIT, 1987). For the developing convergence of postanalytical and Continental philosophical traditions, see Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> For a telling recent critique of the subjective turn in theology, see Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

of them has provoked. I shall conclude with some suggestions for a postmodern appropriation of classical natural theology which bypasses this philosophical critique. An important outcome of this shift in conversation partners will be the recovery, after centuries of accommodation to the challenges of skeptical Western philosophers, of a broadly realist construal of the force of at least some elements in the typical discourse of the major religious traditions.

#### A NEW CONVERSATION

In Christianity the whole meaning of human life can be expressed by saying that human beings are directed to union with God or, to employ the scriptural imagery, to the vision of God: we shall see Him as He is (1 Jn 3:2). But the Christian belief that the true end of life is the beatific vision or union with God is affirmed today in a climate in which knowledge and appreciation of rival claims about the meaning and aim of human life may be expected to be widespread. According to sociologist Peter Berger's analysis, today's social and cultural climate is characterized by a wholesale and seemingly irreversible "pluralization of both institutions and plausibility structures," and thus by an immeasurable expansion of the realm of choice and decision. Alternative views of the meaning of human life compete for attention with Christian beliefs in an enlarged marketplace of ethical and religious wisdom.<sup>4</sup> The teaching functions of the Christian community at every level—whether catechetical, theological, or magisterial—are today inevitably exercised in dialogue with positions (conflicting or otherwise) fostered by public opinion, by secular philosophies, and particularly by non-Christian religious traditions.

Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists all teach different things, and among the more conspicuous are the different things they teach about the ultimate aim of life and the shape life ought to take in view of this aim. "Torah holiness," "beatific vision," "submission to Allah," "release from the cycle of rebirth," "nibbana": the major world religions respectively direct their adherents to final aims of life which seem, at least on the face of the matter, to differ from one another. These religious traditions foster particular ranges of dispositions in their adherents, in view of distinctive teachings about the aim of life, the reasons for pursuing it, and the means to attaining and enjoying it. And, significantly, each of these traditions can be understood to claim that the aim of life it proposes is the one most worthy of pursuit by all human beings without exception.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979) 17; see Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

Different teachings about the focus of life as a whole thus appear to distinguish the overall patterns of life and belief which particular religious communities foster in their members and commend to outsiders. With the increased religious interaction typical of our times has come a heightened awareness of these differences. It seems clear that in present circumstances Christian communities will need to take these distinctive teachings into account as they develop and teach their own doctrines about the focus of life as a whole.

We can gain some perspective on this new conversation by contrasting it with another conversation which has preoccupied Christians in recent centuries: that with modern philosophers since the Enlightenment. Modernity brought with it a pressing need for Christian communities to engage in dialogue with thinkers who were building religious proposals into their philosophical positions. The intentions of some of these philosophers were friendly: they meant to offer support for Christian claims perceived to be under attack for one reason or another. Other philosophers were markedly unsympathetic to Christian claims. Hence, increasingly the dialogue turned into a conversation with thinkers seeking to challenge central Christian claims about God, revelation, the course of history, the reliability of the Bible, the possibility of natural theology, the meaningfulness of religious (i.e., "Christian") discourse, and so on.

Such thinkers might adopt a religiously skeptical or atheistic point of view, or they might propose an independent religious philosophy, partially congruent and partially contrasting with the pattern of life and doctrines proposed by particular Christian communities. Thus, very much at issue in these discussions were "religious" matters as these had come to be defined since the Enlightenment. It was during that period that the idea first seriously occurred to people on a large scale that one could be religious (by holding to some fundamental religious beliefs about God, human destiny, and the moral order) without being a member of any particular religious tradition (i.e., without being Christian, Jewish, or Muslim). Furthermore, other thinkers seemed to challenge the very scope of religious knowledge and explanation itself, which was seen to be in constant retreat before the inexorable advance of knowledge in the human and natural sciences.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In *Roger's Version* (New York: Knopf, 1986) John Updike aptly describes this flight into ever-narrowing contexts (though with different intentions than mine): "Whenever theology touches science it gets burned. In the sixteenth century astronomy, in the seventeenth microbiology, in the eighteenth geology and paleontology, in the nineteenth Darwin's biology all grotesquely extended the world-frame and sent churchmen scurrying for cover in ever smaller, shadowy nooks, little gloomy ambiguous caves in the psyche where even now neurology is cruelly harrying them, gouging them out from the multifolded brain like wood lice from under the lumber pile" (32).

This situation is in marked contrast to the one posed by religious interaction. Here Christian communities confront not personal religious philosophies but massive and enduring bodies of religious wisdom and highly ramified systems of doctrines derived from sources as ancient and rich as any of their own. Moreover, the challenges that arise from this encounter come not from religiously skeptical individuals but from religious communities advancing well-developed alternative conceptions of the ultimate aim of life and the pattern life ought to take in view of this aim.

Assessing the implications of this (relatively) new conversation is part of the theological task in present circumstances. It seems clear (though I shall not argue the case here) that theological positions supporting a strong affirmation of Christian identity in conjunction with an informed evaluation of alternative claims will have a decisive advantage over those advocating retreat on the one hand or accommodation on the other.<sup>6</sup>

I shall argue that the matters which fall under traditional natural or philosophical theology (especially arguments for the existence of God and theories of analogy) have a central, though perhaps unexpected, role to play in the present situation. This is true not only because the centrality of teachings about the focus of life in each of the major world religions will require arguments about the existence and nature of the ultimate object of a religion. In addition, the encounter of Christianity with other religious traditions throws into sharp focus some important features of the logic of the discourse of religious communities, especially the kinds of arguments which their doctrines seem to entail. Let us consider some of these arguments now.

#### THE LOGIC OF REFERENCES AND PREDICATIONS IN RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

To gain some perspective on this topic, imagine a conversation between a Muslim and a Theravada Buddhist about religious matters. After listening for a while, the Buddhist asks the Muslim to identify the term "Allah," which has come up several times in the conversation. The Muslim replies that Allah is the one who spoke to Muhammad, as recounted in the Koran. Although the Buddhist is not yet familiar with

<sup>6</sup> George Lindbeck, "The Sectarian Future of the Church," in Joseph P. Whelan, ed., *The God Experience* (New York: Newman, 1971) 226-43; see also Peter Berger, "A Sociological View of the Secularization of Christianity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6 (1967) 3-16. The current situation of the Christian Church bears comparison with that of the emerging Church in late antiquity: see Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1986). I have presented a preliminary account of some of the theological implications of this new situation in "The Universality of Salvation and the Diversity of Religious Aims," *Worldmission* 32 (1981-82) 1-15.

the Koran and knows little about Muhammad, he begins to catch the drift. He asks whether Allah is like one of the gods of the Hindu pantheon who appears occasionally to human beings. No, replies the Muslim: Allah is God, the only one God, who rewards the just and punishes the wicked, and who can never be seen by human eyes. The Buddhist continues to be puzzled. So the Muslim invites him to observe the beauty and orderliness of the natural world. Allah is the one who made and preserves all this. The whole meaning of life is to live in submission to him ("Islam"). And so the conversation might proceed.

Suppose that during the course of the conversation the Buddhist should refer to "nibbana." Since the Buddhist seems to attach such great importance to the reality designated by this term, the Muslim begins to assume that the Buddhist must be talking about God. Is nibbana a name for God? No, nibbana is not any kind of God. Indeed, it is not a presently existing entity at all. It is a state of being. The Muslim needs help in grasping this. So the Buddhist might now invite him to think of intense experiences he has had which have been so absorbing that he has felt transported outside of himself. Nibbana is something like this, only ineffably more so. The chief aim of life is to attain this blissful state by following the Excellent Eightfold Path.

In each of these cases some fact or state of affairs within experience serves as a starting point for a reference to the focus of life in Islam and Buddhism respectively. The Muslim points to the observable pattern of things and attributes this to the agency of Allah. The Buddhist invokes a certain range of intense states of experience in order to identify the ultimate state of nibbana.

This hypothetical conversation throws light on a certain group of arguments which seem to be logically required if a religious tradition is to support its claims about the focus of life as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Referential arguments of this kind function logically to introduce a logical subject—the focus of life—into the discourse of a religious tradition. The style of such arguments varies widely with the range of distinctive beliefs about the focus of life among religions. What are usually called "arguments for the existence of God" in Christianity and other theistic religions thus have formal parallels in nontheistic religions.

Another group of arguments function to keep the discourse moving, as it were, when certain features are attributed to the focus of life. Thus, the Muslim will go on to assert that Allah is holy, and the Buddhist that nibbana is the fulness of bliss and the absence of bliss. To advance and

<sup>7</sup> This account of arguments in religious discourse is dependent upon William A. Christian, Sr., *Meaning and Truth in Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1964) 185–237.

develop these kinds of assertions, arguments in support of predication would be needed. In Christianity, talk about the divine attributes falls into this category of argument. The force of religious predication is at issue here.

In one respect the hypothetical conversation sketched above is misleading in that it suggests that such arguments have mainly apologetical uses in discussions between the members of a religious community and nonmembers. In fact, however, the primary logical setting of both referential and predication religious arguments is internal to the religious scheme itself. Such arguments serve to locate the central affirmations of a religious community on the widest possible conceptual map. Hence they function chiefly to explicate the force of a community's doctrines. Although important, their apologetical uses are ancillary to their internal uses. Arguments of these types serve highly ramified purposes in understanding the whole of a doctrinal scheme, since they provide the basis for linking a community's doctrines with a wide range of natural and human concerns.

In Christianity these two types of arguments—referential arguments and arguments to support predication—have come to be grouped together under the somewhat misleading rubrics "natural theology" or "philosophical theology." My object in this section has been to indicate that arguments of this kind are not a peculiarly Christian invention, but seem to be required by the logical structure of the discourse of religious communities. A realization of this is an outcome of recognizing the import of the new conversation I described earlier. This becomes especially apparent when one turns from the conversation with modern philosophy in which these arguments have been subjected to persistent attack.

#### ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

A word about the logic of references in general discourse will throw light on special problems posed for religious references. When I begin to speak about the "tulips in the cloister garden," an ostensive reference is enough for you to know what I am talking about: all I have to do is point to them. If I say that I have vacationed on Barbados, however, simple ostension will not do: you will need an atlas if you are unfamiliar with the island and its location. If I start speaking about protons and neutrons, ostension will fail completely: something more is needed to establish a reference for subatomic or theoretical particles. To get along in most conversations about particular subjects, of course, we rely on broad general knowledge for supplying the required references. It is rare that something utterly unheard of and unfamiliar comes up for discussion.

Religious references are more complex. In most religions, even relatively undeveloped ones, the focus of life and worship is normally not thought to be identical with any sense-perceptible object within ordinary experience. We saw above that talk about Allah and nibbana requires starting points in experience which orient us in the right "direction" to see what is being referred to. But it turns out that more extended arguments will be needed to bridge the gap between ordinary experience and the focal objects and/or states at the center of religious affirmations.

To proceed directly to the contexts defined by theistic religious affirmations, two modes of reference play a central role in referential arguments for religious doctrines whose focus is a transcendent agent.<sup>8</sup> These are references which construe certain observable facts or patterns in experience as (1) regular or (2) extraordinary effects caused by the transcendent agent.

The first type of reference appeals to regular or persistent features of the natural order like perishability, or design, or finality, and so on. Arguments are framed to show that the whole natural order exhibiting such features is brought into and preserved in existence by the transcendent agent. Jewish, Muslim, and Christian theologians have developed many versions of such arguments, usually in connection with some metaphysical schemes (employing broadly Platonic or Aristotelian conceptualities, or hybrids of these).<sup>9</sup> The second type of reference appeals to extraordinary or unusual facts or events, whether straightforwardly miraculous or simply nonregular. Normally such events have been recounted in the sacred literature of the community or the testimony of its leaders and saints.

As a kind of shorthand, we can say that these two types of reference are distinguished by their appeal to nature on the one hand, or to history on the other. References and arguments of the first type have a broader sweep, logically speaking, than those of the second type for two reasons. First, particular events with a religious import belong to the larger class of historical events and are thus subject to the principles of observation and explanation applicable to events generally. Secondly, the extraordinary events which function as the starting point for religious references are reported in confessional narratives and are in principle subject to nonconfessional explanations.

A third type of reference should be mentioned here. It takes as its starting point certain features of the subjective states of human beings. In so far as some of these states have the character of regular or

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.* 168–84.

<sup>9</sup> See David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1986).

extraordinary effects caused by the transcendent agent, this mode of reference is not clearly distinct from the first two. But their designation as a third type is justified by the logical peculiarity they exhibit: references of this type are largely self-certifying. They depend for their force not on observation and publicly-shared experiences but on testimony about private or interior experiences of God, or on necessary entailments of concepts about God, or on recognition of the pervasive law-abidingness of human beings, or on the widespread and heartily-felt conviction of many people that there is a God, and so on.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

There is no possibility here of charting in detail the long and interesting career such arguments have enjoyed in Christian theology. My object is to show the impact upon them of the ongoing conversation between Christian theology and modern Western philosophy.

Arguments of the first type have played an important role in all classical Christian theology. In classical Christian theology, references of all three types, whether well developed or implicit, are interwoven and mutually reinforcing. With the coming of modernity, arguments of the first type, appealing to the natural order, were subjected to a devastating critique from which they have never fully recovered. In the wake of this critique, arguments of the second and third types, appealing to history and the self, have gradually taken over the field. It seems clear that this development has weakened the force of theological affirmation. For it has long been recognized that logical rigor and objectivity decrease as one moves from the first to the third type. While references of the third type possess a great psychological interest and intensity, they are largely self-certifying. Appeals to history rest on the reliability of confessional documents or on speculative philosophies of history. Without the reinforcement of arguments of the first type, referential arguments warranted exclusively by historical or subjective data are peculiarly vulnerable logically speaking. A few remarks about the history of modern theology will serve to confirm this judgment.<sup>10</sup>

Two developments in particular had decisive consequences for the internal or doctrinal uses of arguments of the first type. In the first place, their connection with the doctrinal schemes of Christianity and other theistic religious traditions was severed. This separation developed on two fronts. First, with the Enlightenment such arguments were pried from their doctrinal settings in order to specify the kernel of natural

<sup>10</sup> Two books by James Collins describe these developments: *God in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago: Regnery, 1959) and *The Emergence of the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967). See also J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion* (New Haven: Yale University, 1987).



religion within (and eventually opposed to) revealed or positive religion. In effect, such arguments were turned against the doctrinal schemes they were developed to support. Secondly, increasingly their apologetic virtualities were stressed: they served to demonstrate to skeptical outsiders the "reasonableness" of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> As a result, such arguments came to be viewed as establishing part of the subject matter of distinct fields of inquiry called "natural theology" or "philosophical theology," in principle largely independent of the doctrinal contexts of particular theistic traditions.

A more serious episode in the history of arguments of the first type came with Kant's critique of what he took to be all versions of such arguments. The widespread acceptance of this critique set the stage for the historical and subjective turns executed in much 19th-century Protestant and 20th-century Catholic theology.

Kant contended that such arguments fail to deliver the results they promise. They suppose the possibility of moving from metaphysical assertions about the structures of things in themselves conceived as a single effect to God as the First Cause. In fact, such cosmological and teleological arguments (as Kant tagged them) are covertly versions of the ontological argument. Tied to the rationalist conception of metaphysics in which he was reared, Kant contended that such arguments traffic in concepts (causality, contingency, design, being, world, God) which derive not from experience, as they purport to, but from the mental apparatus used to structure incoming perceptions. Such arguments achieve no more than the ontological argument: they unpack the content of the concept of God rather than showing that He exists.<sup>12</sup>

The Kantian critique of metaphysics and classical natural theology in effect permanently undermined the plausibility of arguments of the first type. In so far as theologians accepted this critique as definitive, they turned to arguments of the second and third types to support Christian affirmation. Hegel in effect transformed the whole of the philosophy of history into an all-encompassing dialectical argument of the second type. Schleiermacher welcomed the Kantian critique of metaphysics and natural theology, and substituted appeal to the God-relation given in the very structure of the self for appeal to nature or history. Subsequently, even when they did not adopt the details of the Hegel or Schleiermacher programs, theologians were deeply influenced by the turns to history and

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Migration of Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics," in Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, eds., *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1986) 38–81. See Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Second Division, chap. 3.

the self which these programs commended.

In large measure the subsequent history of modern Protestant theology has seen the erosion of theological positions which took these turns. Without the massive reinforcement provided by the Hegelian system, the appeal to history has proved to be extraordinarily vulnerable as a support for theological affirmation in the face of the combined challenge of Feuerbach, Marx, Darwin, and the historical-critical study of the Bible. Despite its continued appeal, the turn to the structures of self-consciousness is widely regarded as having received a deathblow from Feuerbach (and, derivatively, Freud). Feuerbach's critique of Christian affirmation seems an inevitable response to the retreat of theologians from the field of natural theology classically conceived as an enterprise involving appeal to some accounts of a nonsubjective order. A "natural theology" rooted exclusively in some account of the transcendent dynamism or structure of human subjectivity relies on self-certifying propositions about internal experiences. Feuerbach can be construed as fixing on this weakness in contending that theological concepts of God objectify human traits, aspirations, ideals, and perfections and project them onto a transcendent realm. Barth's profoundly influential polemic against natural theology may be construed as an acknowledgment of the force of Feuerbach's critique of the subjective turn. Barth secures the divine identity, as essentially independent of descriptions of the human reality, by basing it radically in the divine act of revelation and the narrative it engenders. Theology either begins with this revelation and its overarching narrative or falls prey to human hypostatizations masquerading as God.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY AND POSTMODERN THEOLOGY

The move toward postmodern positions among American Protestant theologians received a powerful stimulus from Barth's reading of the history of 19th-century theology. Acceptance of the Kantian critique of referential arguments of the first type and acknowledgment of the failure of arguments of the second and third types have done much to shape contemporary Protestant theology. Protestant theologians who have been influenced by Barth are forging an ingenious combination of resolutely anti-Cartesian Anglo-American analytical philosophy and Continental hermeneutics to fill the role of discredited referential arguments. Postliberal theologians can be distinguished from revisionists not with respect to background assumptions about these matters (which they largely share) but with respect to the role in theological affirmation they accord to specifically Christian language and narrative.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985); William Placher, "Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology," *Thomist* 49 (1985) 392-416.

The response to modernity has been delayed in Roman Catholic theology and compressed into the 40 or so years spanning the preconciliar and postconciliar periods in this century. The short-lived (at least among Catholic theologians) Neo-Scholastic revival is perceived by many to have provided only a temporary bulwark against the tides of modernity pressing against it. As might be expected, Catholic strategies for dealing with modernity's challenge to classical natural theology have matched earlier Protestant moves. The 20th-century transcendental turn in Catholic theology roughly parallels the 19th-century turn to the subject in Protestant theology. Prevailing Rahnerian (though not necessarily Rahner's) theology exhibits remarkable formal and material similarities to modern Protestant theological positions. But transcendental styles are giving way to aesthetic, critical, and hermeneutical styles as Catholic theology yields to the pressures of anti-Cartesian developments in Protestant theology and in contemporary philosophy.

The ongoing conversation between Christian theology and modern Western philosophy has not favored referential arguments of any of the traditional types. In effect, nature, history, and the self have yielded to language and narrative as the context for theological affirmation. In the perspective of the history of classical theology and of the new conversation with the major world religions, this context seems a sharply narrowed one.

Rorty's advice comes to mind at this juncture. It might be time to set aside, if only experimentally, the theological agenda defined by the conversation with modern Western philosophy and try a new one. Rather than be ruled by philosophical theories about the structure of Christian discourse and the topics which it addresses, the encounter with other religions invites the Christian theologian to develop the agenda for his/her inquiries with a view to the internal requirements of Christian discourse as a form of discourse exhibiting certain structural features—among them a fairly straightforward claim to the existential force (in the logical sense) and truth of primary doctrines which convey beliefs. "Natural theology" in the Christian and other theistic traditions, and its cognates in nontheistic religions, comprise important sets of arguments developed to support claims of this sort. It is not clear that a religious tradition could maintain such a claim if it refrained from developing any arguments for it. It has been an unfortunate outcome of the conversation with skeptical modern philosophers that Christian confidence in the possibility and importance of such arguments has been gradually undermined.

It is crucial to the postmodern project in theology to recover the broadest possible context for theological affirmation. Aquinas can be of some help here, since, whatever his weaknesses, he is innocent of the key

Cartesian moves which have been the object of such vigorous attack in postmodern philosophy and theology, i.e. the quest for a unitary method for all knowledge and inquiry ("foundationalism"), the conflation of epistemology and metaphysics, and the separation of consciousness from bodiliness. Naturally, it is neither possible nor desirable to repristinate Aquinas as if the intervening centuries had evaporated. In this connection I am reminded of a recent comment of Bernard Williams about traditional ethics: "There is certainly more to be said for . . . [traditional understandings] than much progressive thought has allowed; indeed there is more to be said for them than there is for much progressive thought. But even if one grants value to traditional knowledge, to try to suppress reflection in that interest can only lead to disaster, rather as someone who finds that having children has disrupted her life cannot regain her earlier state by killing them."<sup>14</sup> The discussion of philosophical theology has been permanently and irreversibly altered by the philosophical and theological debates of the past two centuries or more. Nonetheless, elements of Aquinas' theology can be appropriated in the construction of referential arguments which appeal beyond the narrow contexts of language and narrative, and history and the self, to features of the natural order as these are studied in science and metaphysics. I can do no more here than suggest something of the general lines of such an appropriation.

Central to such an appropriation are Aquinas' conceptions of religious knowledge and religious discourse. In his discussion of human knowledge of God in question 12 of the first part of the *Summa theologiae*, the bulk of the articles (eleven to be exact) are devoted to the beatific knowledge of God, and only one article each to faith and natural knowledge of God. This disproportionate treatment might be construed as follows. Any adequate description of the range of human knowledge of God in the present life must begin with some account of what our knowledge of Him will be like in the life to come. To put this another way: we will know truth about our capacity to know God now only by considering the consummation towards which our present knowledge is directed by grace. What is possible to us now can be appreciated only in the light of what our knowledge shall become.

This approach invites us to see human knowledge of God from above, as it were, down to its lower levels. It is not so much a matter of independent bodies of knowledge—natural and then revealed—which develop independently and then come to be related to one another. All that is true knowledge is taken up into the knowledge of faith and the

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1985) 168. On the absence of "Cartesianism" in Aquinas, see, e.g., Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979) 27–31.

knowledge of vision. Everything presupposed to the human intellect and will as natural capacities is taken up so that it can now function at a higher level, i.e. successfully knowing and loving God. The encapacitation of the human person to function at this new level involves new information certainly, but also new empowerment.

This approach illumines the role of what I have called referential arguments in theology. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review Aquinas' discussion of the Five Ways, I want to note here that in Aquinas their function is not primarily apologetic.<sup>15</sup> Rather, such arguments function to locate Christian worship, nurture, practice, and belief on the widest possible conceptual map: the God who is adored, proclaimed, and confessed in the Christian Church is none other than the cause of the world. Such arguments are seen to have scheme-specific and mainly internal theological uses in sustaining the broadest possible context for Christian affirmation, in connection not only with the doctrine of God but with the doctrines of grace, Christology, sacraments, and so on throughout the Christian scheme. They serve as the basis for locating such affirmations with reference to objective states of affairs.

Another point at which a postmodern theology can appropriate Aquinas concerns his account of the logic of religious discourse in question 13 of the first part of the *Summa theologiae*. Aquinas can be read as proposing his own account as an alternative to semantic characterizations of the force of doctrines according to which all substantial affirmative predications (SAP) are construed to be either: (1) negative propositions: all SAP can be reformulated as paradoxical or apophatic utterances which deny limitations in God (thus: "God is good" = "God is not evil"); or (2) relative propositions: all SAP can be restated as assertions about the divine causal activity as experienced by us, or as descriptions of our experience of God, or of our relation to Him (thus: "God is good" = "God is the cause of goodness"); or (3) metaphorical propositions: all SAP are construable as evocations (nondiscursive symbols) which afford, occasion, or express certain experiences of the transcendent realm without being directly descriptive of it (thus "God is good" is symbolic).

Aquinas acknowledges the germ of truth in these alternative accounts of the force of religious doctrines: the divine realm is beyond the reach of our terms and concepts in their ordinary uses and meanings. But these accounts are partial, as I understand his account of them, in that they require an implausible reconstrual of all prima-facie substantial affirmative predications which occur throughout the range of Christian usage: e.g., "God is good, faithful, etc." Some nonreductive account of such propositions is needed, and the theory of analogy is advanced as such an

<sup>15</sup> See Brian Davies, *Thinking about God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985).

account. There is a conviction that many ordinary concepts are already employed in analogous senses and that, given the proper qualifications, they can be employed in religious and theological discourse.<sup>16</sup> Thus the theory of analogy is a theory of predication, framed to account for Christian discourse in use, providing a straightforward reading of utterances which have the form of substantial affirmative predications, supported by premises in philosophy (concerning especially being, causality, and participation—the so-called *analogia entis*) and in theology (particularly concerning creation and the created order), and exploiting features of ordinary language which permit extensions of the meanings of many terms.

In its respect for the distinctive logical features of religious discourse and its resistance to the imposition of theoretical constraints on the force of religious doctrines, Aquinas' account of analogical predication is congruent with some recent philosophical analysis of religious discourse.<sup>17</sup> This gives it a peculiarly contemporary ring. Such an account can be employed to great effect in articulating the existential and realist force of Christian affirmations as they are meant.

The chief strength of Aquinas' conceptions of the nature and grace of religious knowledge and the logic of religious discourse lies in their capacity to relate Christian affirmations to a wide variety of explanatory contexts beyond their linguistic, narrative, historical, and subjective settings. I have suggested that this is an important requirement of natural or philosophical theology in its postmodern phase. Such accounts break through the constraints imposed on Christian theology in the course of its long dialogue with the modern Western philosophical tradition. The internal logic of the discourse of religious traditions entails at least the possibility that primary doctrines can be supported by arguments to establish a reference to the entity or state at the center of the community's pattern of life and arguments to explicate the force of its predications.

Theological arguments supporting the references and predications of the Christian scheme stake a claim, logically speaking, in the large territory of human knowledge about the world. There are no internal restrictions which prevent the appeal of such arguments to relevant scientific findings or to metaphysical and conceptual analysis.<sup>18</sup> The

<sup>16</sup> David B. Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., William A. Christian, Sr., *Doctrines of Religious Communities* (New Haven: Yale University, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> See Benedict Ashley, *Theologies of the Body* (Braintree, Mass.: Pope John XXIII Center, 1985).

Kantian critique of metaphysics and natural theology continues mistakenly to be invoked in support of such constraints. The mistake here is the failure to recognize that the pervasive rationalism of Kant's conception of epistemology and metaphysics is itself susceptible of counterargument and revision. In effect, whatever their other weaknesses, nonrationalist metaphysical positions (e.g., Aristotle's) escape unscathed. It would take another long paper to discuss the current attacks on metaphysics originating in pragmatist (especially Rorty's) and hermeneutical (Heidegger's) philosophies. My general argument here is applicable to these attacks as well. As accounts of the discourse of religious traditions, grand philosophical theories which rule out in principle a broadly realist construal of religious texts and doctrines will seem implausible and counterintuitive.<sup>19</sup> As far as the logic of the discourse of religious communities is concerned, the burden of proof lies with these theories themselves. Christianity is one with other major religious traditions in claiming objective states of affairs as the context for its teachings about God, the world, and the conditions of human existence. There is for this reason wide scope for interreligious arguments where rival claims turn out to be conflicting claims. But that is also a subject for another day. Theological arguments to support references and predications (philosophical or natural theology) function to locate Christian affirmations about the nature and existence of God, His inner-Trinitarian life, creation, revelation and grace, human nature, sin and evil, incarnation and redemption, justification and sanctification, morality and spirituality, church and sacraments, resurrection and glory, eschatology and the last things in the widest possible context of reality, thought, and experience.

Modern Christian theology has allowed challenges framed mainly by philosophical considerations to narrow the context of such arguments or to rule them out entirely. Postmodern Christian theology is in effect invited by its new conversation partners in the great world religions to recover and reconstruct its philosophical theology.

A final word about the relation of my proposal to projects labeled "fundamental theology" or "foundational theology." I have avoided these terms because of their association with the discredited Cartesian project of grounding the certitude of all knowledge in unassailably true, simple, lapidary propositions or conceptions. "Foundational theology" has come to be linked with Neo-Scholastic apologetics of a rationalist cast or with the more recent transcendental (and broadly Cartesian) project of expli-

<sup>19</sup> Hans W. Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in Frank McConnell, ed., *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (New York: Oxford University, 1986) 68–69.

cating the truth of Christian doctrines in terms of the conditions for the possibility of our knowledge of them.<sup>20</sup> My proposal of a role for arguments in support of the references and predications embedded in Christian affirmations is a much more modest one. Philosophical theology, according to my account, does not seek to ground the truth of these affirmations, but locates the widest possible context for our understanding and explication of them.<sup>21</sup> It resists the suggestion that these affirmations apply only in the narrow contexts defined by subjectivity, historical consciousness, or language. Staking this claim, I have suggested, is not equivalent to establishing a foundation for the truth of all Christian doctrines once and for all. That "foundation" exists only in the truth who is God Himself and can never be a human construction. Rather, the readiness to develop and employ arguments of the sort described in this paper characterizes a conception of the theological enterprise in which—case by case, doctrine by doctrine—the force of Christian affirmations is expounded in connection with the full range of human knowledge of the world. I have avoided the label "foundational theology" as a designation for theological arguments of this kind because, rightly or wrongly, it is perceived to signal a project far more grand than the one I have in view.

<sup>20</sup> For an account of these developments, see Francis S. Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 250–84.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph McInerny, "Analogy and Foundationalism in Aquinas," in Audi and Wainwright, *Rationality* 271–88.