

## **THREE WATERSHEDS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

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### **Introductory Remark**

I begin with a disclaimer. I will not be presenting here a comprehensive hermeneutical theory, as I have no such theory to offer. I wish I did, but I don't. What you'll find here instead is a presentation of some hermeneutical principles I call "watersheds" because they are so fundamental to interpreting scripture that they would surely have to be a part of any more comprehensive theory of interpretation. Nevertheless, I've not chosen them for that reason alone, but also because they address issues that are now increasingly influential, pervasive, and troubling - not just to scholars but to many average Christians.

### **Watershed I: Pantheism vs. Transcendence**

The two sides of this divide designate opposing and irreconcilable ideas of divinity, each of which is associated with a distinctive hermeneutic for the scriptures that are the official repositories of that idea of divinity.' My central concern here is with attempts to interpret the Bible by means of the pantheistic hermeneutic.

Bible writers so frequently and clearly denounce all forms of pagan religion, that I can't imagine a plausible interpretation of their works that understands them to regard any part of the natural world as divine. But because no Bible writer seems to have encountered and specifically rejected pantheistic religion, a number of thinkers have decided that the proper understanding of the biblical writings is discovered only if we assume some version of pantheism along with its concomitant idea of what a scripture is. Examples of such thinkers include (but are not limited to) Frederich Schleiermacher, Paul Tillich, and Joseph Campbell. Perhaps the best way to explain this side of the watershed, however, is not to start with a western scholarly version of pantheism but with its most ancient version, Hinduism. So I will start with a brief sketch of the Hindu view of divinity and scripture and contrast it to the traditional Christian idea of divinity and scripture.

In Hinduism the divine, called Brahman-Atman, is not anything we could possibly

conceive or perceive. In fact, everything we can perceive or conceive is but illusion (Maya). For most Hindus this is meant in the strongest sense; it is not merely the assertion that all we can conceive and perceive is less real than the divine reality, but that it is totally unreal altogether. Brahman-Atman, is completely inconceivable in the sense that it is the negation of everything we can know, imagine, or say; nothing that seems to be true of illusory things is true of the divine. Brahman-Atman is therefore not an individual being, is not personal, and doesn't know or think or feel. It has no properties. To emphasize its absolute reality as opposed to the unreality of ourselves and all that we ordinarily experience, however, it can be called "being-itself."

In all pantheistic traditions the divine either includes or just *is* everything. If a version of it allows (as majority Hinduism does not) that there really are finite individuals, then those individuals are taken to be parts of the larger all-encompassing divine reality. So according to the pantheist gospel the good news is two-fold: first, we are really essentially divine; second, it is possible for us to know this and to be fully united with (absorbed into) the divine. In Hinduism this means being released from the cycle of rebirth (samsara) which dooms us to one lifetime after another of illusion and suffering. Anyone having accomplished this release is thereby guaranteed the state of Nirvana, and is delivered from all suffering by being absorbed into the divine "as a drop of water is absorbed into the ocean".

The way in which one comes to know all this is the same as the way one comes to be guaranteed Nirvana, namely, through a mystical experience. The experience can best be described as a brief moment of Nirvana, as it is the experience of being (temporarily) absorbed into the One reality so that all differences disappear and are seen to be illusory. Once a person has had that experience, he or she becomes genuinely detached from the illusory world of ordinary experience and rejects it for what it is. The mystical experience, along with its concomitant world-rejection, assures that what will appear to others as the death of the person so enlightened, will actually be that person's release from samsara and unification with Brahman-Atman.

There are a number of prescriptions in Hinduism for inducing this mystical experience called "paths to enlightenment". These are laid out in the same scriptures that expound this view of divinity, human nature, and human destiny. These scriptures are regarded as sacred writings that are in a sense "inspired". But the sense in which they are inspired is not at all the same sense as that found in Christianity. For Hindus, the Vedas, Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, etc., are scriptures in the sense that they contain accounts of how to achieve the mystical experience by people who have successfully achieved it. These accounts may vary; they may even be inconsistent. No matter, since they are all attempts to "ef" what is ineffable, to describe something that really can't be described. They are one and all fallible, limited, human stabs at being helpful to others in achieving their own mystical experience. In the final analysis, then, each person must

find his or her own way. No one pathway can be adequately defined, just as no description of the mystical state of oneness with the divine can ever truly convey it; unity with the divine is as ineffable as the divine itself. Hence the variations and inconsistencies in the writings are to be expected and are of no consequence. As a Brahmin priest once said to me: "I know what the writings say, but I must find the truth for myself. If my experience differs from the writings, so much the worse for them." This is also the point of the famous old Hindu story of the three blind men who describe an elephant by feeling various parts of its body. Each comes up a different description despite the fact that each is experiencing the same object.

Both this view of the divine and of the role of sacred writings in knowing the divine must immediately strike a Christian as strange - and false. To begin with, the idea of God in Christianity is in many ways the reverse of Brahman-Atman. In Christianity the divine reality is not all there is; God has brought into existence a created universe which is real and distinct from him, though in all respects dependent on him. Moreover, while there is that about God's absolute reality which is beyond our comprehension, God has made himself both knowable and known; God shares properties with us and has acted in time and space to establish relations with the human race. This information has been gradually revealed in a series of covenants established through history in order that we may both know him and stand in right relation to him. The covenants are not a collection of *our* faulty gropings at religious truth, but of *God's* unilateral demands and gracious promises through which we receive his love, forgiveness, and everlasting life. This is why the covenants have always contained very specific content. In fact, one part of their content is the very teaching that the covenants have been recorded and passed from generation to generation under the inspiration and guidance of God. Thus for Christians to say a writing is inspired means that it is an historical record of God's past covenant dealings with humans, the recording and transmission of which have been superintended by God to preserve just the content God wished to have preserved.

Nevertheless, the point I just made would not phase thinkers such as those I named earlier, the ones who have undertaken to interpret biblical religion from a pantheist perspective. For once this perspective is assumed, it does no good to cite biblical texts to show that they present the view of themselves I just summarized. This is because from the pantheist perspective, the theistic view of scripture is itself nothing more than a reflection those writers' failures in attempting to express their inexpressible encounter with the all-encompassing divinity. In this way, all the specific contents presented by the biblical writings are immediately dismissed as the cultural conditioning, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and other biases of the Bible's writers.

As an example of a 20th century employment of this hermeneutic, let's briefly consider Paul Tillich's version. For Tillich, the divine can only have one true description: "infinite"; and the

only synonym for "infinite" is "being-itself". These terms are literally true while no others are.<sup>2</sup> For example, to say God is distinct from the creation can't be true since that would be to regard him as a being rather than being-itself. And since existence is true only of distinct individuals, Tillich says, "It is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it." So too, for every other ascription we could possibly conceive or state: none can be literally true of God. To think any of them as literally true would be to deny God's infinity since "it would [make the infinite to be] conditioned by something other than itself..."<sup>3</sup>

Up to this point what I've reported of Tillich's position is no different from what could have been said by any good Hindu. But he then disagrees with classic Hinduism on the illusory character of everything but the divine being-itself. In Tillich's version, unlike that of Hinduism, there really do exist finite realities that "...participate in the power of being in a finite way ... everything finite participates in being-itself and its infinity."<sup>4</sup> More than that, he then wants to insist over against Hinduism, that the language we use of God can be *true*. He attempts to explain this by his notions of "symbol" and "myth", in which a myth is a complex of symbols. To be sure, Tillich's insistence that language about God is both true and fails to assert anything of God that is a property of God is at first glance manifestly inconsistent. How can any "symbol" be true when whatever it asserts of God is not true of God? So long as that is maintained, it seems that no matter how we define "symbol" and "myth" all we can say and think of God would have to be *false*, not true. Tillich's answer to this is to hold that while "There can be no doubt that any concrete assertion about God must be symbolic ... [finite statements about God] can [still be true], because that which is infinite is being-itself and because everything participates in being-itself." <sup>5</sup>

So how does that help?

What he has in mind here isn't easy to make clear, but appears to go like this. Using the expression "ultimate concern" as equivalent to "faith", Tillich asserts that the *truth* of a statement about God is not that it attributes to God anything true of God qua unconditional, but that "...it adequately expresses one's ultimate concern..." where the object of that concern "...is really the ultimate [being-itself]."<sup>6</sup> In other words the statements are true not of God but of us - of our ultimate concern. Our language expresses how we think and feel about the infinite being-itself. But then since we, along with everything else, are actually part of being-itself, our assertions are in *that* sense also true of God! They're not true of God qua divine; only "being-itself" is true in that sense. But they're true in the senses that, 1) they accurately express what is in fact true of us, 2) we are part of the divine, and 3) they are intended by us to point toward God qua unconditional. Notice that the language succeeds at being true - even in this tortured sense - only if it's not taken as a true description of God qua being-itself. As soon as we take any symbol or myth literally, it becomes flat out false - and worse! As Tillich says:

“If faith is the state of being ultimately concerned,  
and if every ultimate concern must express itself concretely, the special symbol of  
the ultimate,  
concern participates in its ultimacy. It participates  
in its unconditional character, although it is not unconditional itself. This ... is  
[also] the source  
of idolatry ... [and] intolerance. The one expression  
of the ultimate denies all other expressions.”<sup>7</sup>

So not only falsehood but also intolerance results from failing to recognize any myth as merely myth. Viewing any myth as literal truth is wrong because "There is no conditional way of reaching the uncondition- ed ... no finite way of reaching the infinite."<sup>8</sup> And it is intolerant because each myth, if taken as true of God, rules out the truth of every other. The way to avoid both falsehood and unwarranted intolerance, then, is to reject the idea of revelation found in the bible writers themselves, and recognize all myths as equally capable of expressing human ultimate concern.

Lest there be any doubt as to whether Tillich realized  
this view was radically contrary to the traditional Judeo-Christian position, listen to this:

Revelation is popularly understood as divine  
Information about divine matters, given to  
prophets and apostles and dictated by the divine  
Spirit to the writers of the Bible.... every word  
of the present discussion contradicts this  
meaning of revelation... Revelation is first of  
all the experience in which ultimate concern grasps  
the human mind and creates a community in which the  
concern expresses itself in symbols...<sup>9</sup>

Therefore the proper view of symbol and myth is one which

... first rejects [any] division of the divine  
and goes beyond it to one God, although in different  
ways according to the different types of religion.  
Even one God is an object of mythological language,  
and if spoken about is drawn into the framework of  
time and space. Even he loses his ultimacy if made

to be the content of concrete concern. Consequently, the criticism of myth does not end with the rejection of polytheistic mythology. [It includes]... the mythological elements of the Bible...- stories like those of the Paradise, of the fall of Adam, of the great flood, of the exodus from Egypt, of the virgin birth of the messiah, of his many miracles, of his resurrection and ascension, of his expected return as judge of the universe...<sup>10</sup>

He goes on:

Those who live in an unbroken mythological world ... resist, often fanatically, any attempt to introduce an element of uncertainty by "breaking the myth", namely by making conscious its symbolic character... Creation is taken as a magical act which happened once upon a time. The fall of Adam is localized on a special geographical point and attributed to a human individual. The virgin birth of the messiah is understood in biological terms, resurrection and ascension as physical events, the second coming of the Christ as ...cosmic Catastrophe. The presupposition of such literalism is that God is a being, acting in time and space ... [this] deprives God of his ultimacy, and religiously speaking, of his majesty.<sup>11</sup>

I'll not pursue this contrast further because I believe enough has been said to make clear how every doctrine of the Christian Faith (and of the other theistic traditions as well) is undermined and transformed by such a hermeneutic.

The element of truth on Tillich's side of this first watershed is that in biblical theism there is that about God which is beyond human understanding; God's unconditional being outside time and above all the laws found in creation is, indeed, beyond our ability to conceptualize. But biblical religion neither starts nor ends with that. It starts with the graciousness of God reaching out to us and offering us his love, forgiveness, and everlasting life. It teaches that God, otherwise unknowable to us, has made himself known by coming to us "clothed in his word" (Luther). In this way biblical religion reverses the order of these elements from what we find in Tillich: we know there is that about God we can't understand only because God has made himself knowable. Rather than starting with the dogma that everything must be part of the unconditional,

uncreated, being-itself, and then asking how we should view the various contrary traditions which attempt to speak of it, biblical religion starts with the encounters in which God, as a definite and personal being, has made himself known in time and space. Only subsequently do we learn from his revelation that there is more to God than is revealed, and that the more is unknowable. And the focus of biblical religion is not on God qua unknowable but on God's gracious, loving accommodation to us. That is why Calvin warned:

As for those who proudly soar above the world to view God in his unveiled essence, it is impossible but that at length they entangle themselves in a multitude of absurd figments. For God - [otherwise] invisible ... clothes himself, so to speak, with the image of the world, in which he would present himself to our contemplation. <sup>12</sup>

One way of summarizing this difference is to say that whereas Tillich is an incompatibilist with respect to God being both infinite and knowable by us, the Bible writers are compatibilists. For them the infinite has taken on finitude, the transcendent has become immanent, the invisible has put on visibility, the author of all the laws in creation has freely subjected himself to them, the divine has assumed humanity. That is the real meaning of the "Word" of God; it is the core of the love of God, and it is the soul of the initiative by which God has become our redeemer. This compatibilism of the biblical position, in contrast to the incompatibilism of pantheism, was given a clear self-conscious statement as early as the Cappadocian Fathers; it was reaffirmed by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin; and it is also found in the work of some of the most outstanding theologians in this century. For example, Karl Barth has said:

When God creates and therefore gives reality to another alongside and outside himself, time begins as the form of existence of this other.... It is true that in this sense, in his pure, divine form of existence, God is not in time but before, above, and after all time ... The creature, however, is not eternal but temporal, i.e., in time ... To be a creature means to be in this way. But how can there be the possibility or actuality of the intercourse between God and the creature ... if not by God's graciousness to his creature, his condescension to it, *by his entrance into its form of existence* ...

if he does not accept it in such a way that he gives himself to its level, entering into its form of existence, there cannot be any intercourse at all between Creator and creature.<sup>13</sup>

No wonder then, that Barth speaks of the revelation of God not as attempts by humans to describe what can't be described - so that we end up talking only about ourselves - but as God's word coming to us "like a stone thrown from another world"!

Given how long this contrast to pantheism has been around, how clearly it's been stated, and how well it's been put by thinkers from the 4th century right up to ones who were Tillich's contemporaries, it's remarkable that Tillich never deals with that contrast nor attempts to rebut it. He merely asserts the incompatibilist thesis. He merely *says* that all finite individuals are parts of the divine and that the individual, personal, knowable, God scripture describes cannot possibly also be eternal, infinite, and unconditional. So while Tillich has given us a detailed *account* of what happens to biblical religion when it's interpreted from the pantheist assumption, nothing he says goes one step toward showing that his side of the watershed is correct. And since he hasn't tried to give arguments for the incompatibilist position, I can't offer to rebut his reasons in its favor. What I can say is that I experience the biblical message as self-evidently the truth about God from God. So I reject the pantheist hermeneutic and stick with the position of the Bible writers themselves.

This means that for both Tillich and myself the controlling factor concerning which side of this hermeneutical watershed to come down on is our religious experience. Hermeneutics, like all other projects, is regulated by what each person experiences to be divine. And when it comes to the hermeneutics of the very scriptures that teach the idea of divinity we experience to be true, that regulation is direct and unmediated. Thus the ultimate ground for each of our positions is not argument but direct experience - the experience of the self-evidency of a particular divinity-belief. For Tillich that belief is that the divine is an inconceivable, quantitatively infinite, being-itself-, for me and many other theists that belief is in the transcendent Creator who has made himself knowable by revealing definite information about himself and our proper relation to him.

## **Watershed II: Religious Focus vs. Encyclopedic Assumption**

If we follow the first watershed down the side of taking scripture to be the inspired record of the covenants of the transcendent Creator, we are immediately confronted with yet another divide.<sup>14</sup> It arises just because we do take the teachings of scripture to be information from God

rather than merely human invention. For as soon as we do this the question arises: does the revelation recorded in scripture carry God's authority about *everything* it mentions or touches on? Is scripture in that sense an encyclopedia? Or should we understand the inspiration of scripture to have a specifically *religious focus*, so that its authority attaches to what it *teaches* about God, humans, and the covenant relation between them?<sup>15</sup>

For most of Christian history this watershed was not consciously distinguished. To be sure, most of the influential theologians - the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, for example - speak in ways that would clearly reflect the religious focus idea had that been explicitly distinguished. But adopting that view they did not seem to have been aware of defending one side of a clearly conceived hermeneutical watershed. That there really is a watershed at this point came to be undeniably clear with the rise of modern science, at which time the majority of thinkers doing the new sciences firmly took the encyclopedic side of it.

This is evident from the way the pioneers of modern science regularly appealed to scripture either as the source of, or as confirmation for, their theories. And it's not hard to see why they found it difficult to resist doing this. Here they are, launched upon forming hypotheses about such matters as the origin and structure of our solar system and planet, the appearance of the earth's land masses, the origins of life forms, the properties of electricity, the processes of the human body, the causes of disease, the origins of language and culture, and a host of other issues involving pre-history. At times they had only the most meager observations as initial conditions from which to hypothesize, and often these were unavoidably faulty. So they were sorely tempted to add to their list of sources of information the scriptures they believed to be inspired by God. Since the scriptures are inspired, they reasoned, isn't it fair to say we can be sure those writings contain the truth and nothing but the truth - even if they don't contain the whole truth on any given subject or skip entire subjects altogether? And if the scriptures do have God's infallibility for any subject they touch on, must we not then begin any investigation by combing the scriptures to see what they may yield toward answering the questions posed by our science?

One needs only a brief glance at the history of early modern science to see that this was standard practice. Names such as Newton, Leibnitz, Boyle, Locke, and Kepler leap to mind. And there were many lesser-knowns as well. For example, Thomas Burnet wrote a work called The Sacred Theory of the Earth in 1684 claiming that the major event in shaping the planet earth was the flood of Noah. And over a century later Richard Kirwan, the father of British mineralogy, took the same position:

Here then we have seen seven or eight geological facts, related by Moses on the one part, and on

the other, deduced solely from the most exact and best verified geological observations, yet agreeing with each other not only in substance but in order of their succession. On whichever of these we bestow our confidence, its agreement with the other demonstrates the truth of the other. But if we bestow our confidence on neither, then their agreement must be accounted for. If we attempt this, we shall find the improbability that both accounts are false, infinite; consequently, one must be true, and, then, so must also the other.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, none of the thinkers mentioned above specifically distinguished and defended what I'm calling the encyclopedic hermeneutic. But as each took an idea from scripture as content for, or confirmation of, a theory in his own field, and the number of fields and theories in which this was done proliferated, the encyclopedic assumption began to emerge as a distinct hermeneutical strategy. And once its core assumption became conscious it was defended vigorously. The defense of it addressed its two key ideas: the encyclopedic scope of the kinds of information to be found in the Bible, and the impossibility of anything false occurring in inspired scripture. As to the first point, there was never any agreement about the *exact* list of topics on which the Bible could be expected to speak. Rather, what was generally assumed was the *possibility* that scripture could contain information on virtually anything; whether it did so for a particular topic was to be decided by careful reading. However, as time went on, and the amount of scriptural information taken to have scientific import grew, some advocates of this position went so far as to affirm that scripture could be expected to have answers for virtually any important issue science encounters! As Henry Morris put it:

It seemed impossible that God would have left so important a matter as [the age of the earth] ...unsettled in his Word... Surely God has the answer in his word!<sup>17</sup>

As to the second point, however, there has always been agreement by all advocates of this slope of the watershed. In that regard, Harold Lindsell's statement of it is as typical of the encyclopedic hermeneutic as are the positions of Newton or Locke:

... the Bible is infallible or inerrant. It communicates religious truth, not religious error. But there is more. Whatever it

communicates is to be trusted and can be relied upon as being true. The Bible is not a textbook on chemistry, astronomy, philosophy, or medicine. But when it speaks on matters having to do with these or any other subjects, the Bible does not lie to us. It does not contain error of any kind."<sup>18</sup>

The emergence of the encyclopedic view of scripture was remarkable in that it flew in the face of the religious focus hermeneutic which had prevailed among Christians in theology, philosophy, and science for over 500 years. During that time, most theologians rejected the notion that the way to tackle subjects in science or philosophy was to comb the scriptures for information that could be included in hypotheses. For example, Thomas Aquinas insisted that revelation had not come from God in order to satisfy human curiosity about the natural world or prehistory, but in order to convey to humans the truths about the supernatural realm. In other words, while the infallible authority of scripture would never lie to us neither would it waste its time on matters of less than eternal importance. In fact, on Thomas' view, there is a virtual partitioning of scripture from science. Not only are we on our own to make hypotheses about the order of nature or prehistory, but any hypothesis is religiously acceptable merely by not contradicting any teaching of the Faith. Thus the guidance we can expect from scripture for theory making is only negative: if a hypothesis contradicts a revealed truth, it's wrong.

It is no doubt unnecessary to say that by the 20th century the encyclopedic hermeneutic had evolved into what we now call fundamentalism. Strange as it sounds to say it, then, fundamentalism is the intellectual heritage of the thinkers who brought about the rise of modern science! By now, fundamentalism is viewed as the epitome of anti-scientific thinking while the Thomistic partition of scripture from science has been re-established as the respectable, scholarly way to keep peace between scripture and science. And the hermeneutic promoted by *scientists* became, when taken over by theologians, to be regarded as the worst form of unscientific intrusion of religion into science! So today the scholastic partitioning of scripture and science is once again prevalent among Christians. It enjoys nothing like the wall to wall acceptance it had in the Middle Ages, of course. Nowadays it's merely the plurality view of theists in philosophy and science, and the majority view among theologians. But that's a significant hegemony at a time when Christian views of science, philosophy, and theology are so fragmented.

So which side of this divide should we take? Is scripture unfailingly inerrant about everything it even casually mentions so that we can expect it to deliver scientific as well as

religious truth? Or is it a book of religion, focussed so thoroughly on our relation to God that we have no right to expect its authority to extend beyond its religious teaching and reach into the content of science?

With one important reservation, I say the right view is the religious focus. Surely scripture wasn't given by God to satisfy our historical curiosity or give us a short cut to scientific discovery. After all, scripture itself tells us that its inspiration can be relied on for "teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness" (II Tim. 3:15). So I side with taking it to have been written to record the content of God's revelation about our relationship to him; it's about his covenant dealings with humans, and is the authoritative source of our knowledge of those covenants. I must immediately add my reservation, however. It concerns the way the traditional Thomistic version of the religious focus hermeneutic goes too far. In my view, the "too far" is whenever it undertakes to partition not only scripture from being a source for scientific theories, but to wall off any religious influence in theories whatever. It's one thing to say that scripture doesn't supply or confirm philosophical or scientific theories, but it's quite another to say that no religious belief can play any role in theories except to rule out those that contradict the Faith. Perhaps the following analogy will help make this difference clearer.

Embedded in the American political tradition is the notion that the state should neither enforce nor forbid any religion, and that the church should not attempt to control the workings of government. Jefferson called that "a wall of separation between church and state". The expression means to convey that there are two distinct institutions, each of which has its own type of authority and its own distinctive role to play in society, so that neither should interfere in the internal affairs of the other. But accepting and endorsing that idea is not the same as saying that no religious *belief* may influence any political *belief*, since that's just not possible. And I hold that the same thing is true about the relation of belief in God to beliefs in all other areas of life including those dealt with by the natural sciences. Scripture doesn't teach science and science doesn't teach religion; but that's not the same as saying that belief in God has no bearing whatever on theories unless it's contradicted by them. And my reason for insisting there's more to their relation is that *scripture itself requires that knowing God makes a difference to every truth of every kind*. That's why it just can't be right that the influence of religious belief on theories is limited only to those cases where a theory outright contradicts some scriptural teaching; according to that view better than 99% of all theories are religiously neutral in the sense that they are unaffected by either belief in God or belief in a God-surrogate. But if knowing God (somehow) impacts all knowledge and all truth, then no theory can be religiously neutral.

This point is especially troubling to those who think my non-neutrality claim requires the fundamentalist encyclopedic hermeneutic. So I now want to show, first, why non-neutrality really

is a biblical teaching and, second, why that teaching actually rules out the encyclopedic hermeneutic and fundamentalism. Then we will be in a position to formulate what I believe to be the right understanding of the religious focus watershed.

### **Watershed III: The Scholastic Partition vs. Universal Regulation**

#### A. The Universal Impact of Religious Belief

The passages of scripture that state that the knowledge of God is the foundation (or "principle part") of all wisdom and knowledge appear at first to be unconvincing for my point (Ps. 111:10; Pr. 1:7, 9:10, 15:33; Jer. 8:9). Since these claims are embedded in poetry and in the heat of a prophetic condemnation of apostasy, they alone cannot bear the weight of the claim that - literally - all knowledge and truth are somehow impacted by the knowledge of God. It is worth noting, however, that they cannot be objected to on the ground that they refer only to wisdom in the sense of ethical insight or practical prudence, since they use "wisdom" and "knowledge" as equivalent. This is shown by Proverbs 3:19 - 20, e.g., where "wisdom" is used for what we would call knowledge of the natural world. I mention this now because even though these texts don't seem clear enough to be convincing when taken on their own, they will reappear as important when assessed in retrospect in the light the New Testament.

In Luke 11:52 Jesus denounces the interpreters of the law for distorting it, and says that they have thereby "taken away the key to knowledge". Notice he does not say (as the traditional scholastic partition would have it) "the key to the knowledge of *God*." He just says "knowledge". No doubt the advocates of the partition will declare this inconclusive and suggest the remark is elliptical. But compare it to I Cor. 1:5 where Paul asserts that knowing God through Christ has "enriched us in *all* wisdom and *knowledge*". This doesn't sound like hyperbole or an elliptical expression. It sounds as though he means what he says, namely, that in some (unspecified) way knowing God enriches all knowledge. The partition-partisan may try to argue that this means only our knowledge of *God*, but several remarks in the context that follows show this is not the case. In chapter 12 verse 8 Paul speaks of the various gifts God gives to believers and specifically mentions the gift of knowledge as well as those of wisdom and faith. Then in chapter 13 we're told that the gift of knowledge will pass away along with other gifts such as tongues and prophecy, but the knowledge of *God* will be made complete. Thus the gift of knowledge which will pass away is different from the knowledge of God which will be perfected rather than pass away. The upshot is that the context distinguishes knowledge in general from the knowledge of God, and says that knowledge in general is (somehow) impacted and "enriched" by knowing God.

Finally, it's important to recall that many passages of scripture use the metaphor of light

to stand for truth, and speak of our being enlightened to signify our acquisition of knowledge. Psalm 43:3 explicitly confirms this meaning of the metaphor when it says "send out thy light even truth". So when Psalm 36:9 asserts that "in [God's] light we see light" it certainly sounds *prima facie* as though it's saying precisely what I Cor. 1:5 says, namely, that truth about God plays some sort of role in seeing more fully all other sorts of truth. And surely the metaphor of light for truth is self-consciously carried on by the N.T. For example, II Cor. 4:3-6 says that unbelievers are blind to seeing the light of the gospel and affirms that this "light" is the "knowledge of God". So it's beyond a reasonable doubt that the N.T. continuation of the metaphor is deliberate and its meaning the same. With this in view, the remarks of Eph. 5:9 are the strongest of all. There we're told that the "fruit" (i.e., the consequences) of the "light" of the truth about God is said to be "found in all that is good, and just, and true".

I find the cumulative effect of these assertions to be powerful. The various passages are, to be sure, sufficiently scattered so as to make it possible to overlook them. And if one has already adopted the partition view and assumes that the knowledge impacted by knowing God is (redundantly) only the knowledge of God, it's even easier to overlook or dismiss the progressive development of this point. But the point and its development is there. Moreover, once it reaches its full statement in I Cor. 1:5 and Eph. 5:9, the earlier claims of the Psalms and Proverbs can't so easily be dismissed as poetic exaggeration. They instead appear to be the early stages of a recurrent and developing theme the final upshot of which is difficult to deny.

I conclude, therefore, that the overall tenor of these passages is to teach that no knowledge is religiously neutral, so that even if we stick with the religious focus hermeneutic we may not adopt its scholastic-partition version. The puzzlement this point bequeaths, then, is how this non-neutrality is to be understood.<sup>19</sup> Surely it *can't be* the encyclopedic program of deriving all sorts of information from scripture. Since the biblical claim is that *all* truth is (somehow) impacted by belief in God, the "somehow" can't be to require all truth to be derived from scripture - not even the most extreme fundamentalist ever said that! So if the encyclopedic hermeneutic isn't the way to understand non-neutrality, what is? And if scripture doesn't *contain* all knowledge and every truth, how does belief in God impact it all?

## B. The Regulative Role of the Doctrine of Creation

I find the answer to this puzzle to have been brilliantly supplied by the late Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd. Dooyeweerd showed that there is a way the knowledge of God can impact every other sort of knowledge - including even the most abstract theories - without our trying to derive the content of those theories from scripture.<sup>20</sup> He was able to show just how belief in God (or any God-surrogate taken to be the ultimate reality in God's place) conditions the way

we conceive the *natures* of things, including the things we postulate in theories. Notice that this is not the claim that if we believe in God we must invent one hypothesis while if we believe in a God-substitute we must invent other hypotheses. That happens at times, of course, but it's not inevitable. What is inevitably different is not the entities we invent but how their natures are conceived; that is what will vary with whatever we regard as divine. Here's an example.

Suppose we're trying to figure out how things are structured physically, and we invent a theory that says there are tiny things called atoms that make up all the bigger things of everyday experience (original huh?). The proposals of the theory, then, include that there exist little things called atoms, other things that are their parts, and relations of atoms and their parts, all of which explain how atoms connect up to form the bigger objects we're familiar with. The view worked out by Dooyeweerd as to how our knowledge of God impacts this theory is not the encyclopedic view; it's not that we find hints in scripture that lead us to think of atoms or that would confirm parts of atomic theory once we thought it up. But then, neither is his view the scholastic partition: atomic theory is not religiously neutral so long as it just doesn't contradict any tenet of the Faith. On his view, what gets guided by religious belief is, as I said, how the *nature* of atoms, their parts, and their relations is conceived. In other words, this version of the religious-focus side of the watershed says that all our concepts are *regulated* by whatever we believe to be ultimate reality, not derived from that belief. Thus what anyone believes about the *nature* of atoms (and everything else) is always under the guidance of belief in God or of some God surrogate.

For the Christian (and other Theists) this regulative guidance amounts to saying that the nature of anything in creation is to be thought of in such a way that *nothing in creation may be conceived as self-existent or as explaining everything else about creation.* This is because the things being conceived, their properties, and the laws that govern them, all depend directly on God who alone is self-existent and is their ultimate explanation.

That's it. If it sounds simple, let me assure you it's not. It means taking the teachings of scripture seriously when they insist that space & time, objects, qualities, laws, and "all things visible or invisible" have been called into being by God and are sustained by him at every moment. It means (to quote St Gregory Palamas)"there are no mediating substances between God and creation". And it means applying these points to every proposal in every sort of theory we make across the whole range of human experience. Moreover, it means doing this in the teeth of the entire tradition of western philosophy and science which has employed the exact reverse of this strategy for almost 3000 years. The strategy of theory making has always been to locate something in creation which is taken as having ultimate reality, and then explaining whatever needs to be explained by *reducing* it to that ultimate reality.<sup>21</sup> (In philosophy "reducing" something means explaining it by showing it's produced by what is taken as ultimate reality, or by

showing it's actually the same as that ultimate reality). The strategy is called "reduction" because explaining anything this way ends up regarding what got explained as either less real than what explains it, or having no distinct reality of its own. Either way, what's explained has less (reduced) status in the world compared with what is ultimate and explains it.

So the central point of the regulative version of the religious-focus hermeneutic is that it requires theists to take a radically non-reductionist understanding of everything, including everything postulated in any theory. That means taking every kind of properties and laws found in creation to be equally real and not reducible to any other kind. In addition, it means taking scientific explanations of things as necessarily incomplete because what they ultimately depend on isn't part of the universe and is thus beyond the range of science. And that means there's never going to be a "theory of everything".

Here's the same program stated another way. Everything either exists independently or dependently, and scripture teaches that only God has independent reality while everything else depends on God. This is true not only of the things we experience every day, but of anything we try to discover by inventing a theory: theoretical entities are also either conceived as dependent on God or not. If they aren't thought to be ultimately dependent on God, then our concept of them will (explicitly or implicitly) regard them as ultimately dependent on something other than God. Whatever that other something is will thus be an alternative divinity, and belief in it will be an alternative religious belief. So in no case is our concept of anything religiously neutral.

Notice that this is not to say that every non-reductionist hypothesis will thereby automatically be correct. We may postulate non-reductionist concepts of atoms, phlogiston, black holes, or animal spirits, and the proposals may be true or false. On the other hand, however, whoever puts something else into the role of the divine reality on which all else depends cannot fail to partially falsify (distort the nature of) any otherwise correctly conceived entity. In western philosophy and science this almost always takes place by forming hypotheses that make the cosmos to depend ultimately on something within it. That is the mistake which is, in principle, avoidable by the theist who knows the true God.

One final point. What has now been shown concerning the scripture's claim that the knowledge of God impacts all other sorts of knowledge is sufficient to rebut the attitude taken by the majority of Christians (and other Theists') toward theories. That attitude failed to challenge reductionist theories and tried instead to maintain them by baptizing (or circumcising) them into Theistic acceptability. Their attempt at this consisted of admitting one or another reductionist theory, and then simply adding that God created whatever it is that everything else in the cosmos reduces to. So they admit that if a theory explained things in the world only by reducing them to

some aspect of creation and stopped at that, we'd have a nontheistic (pagan) explanation. But, says this majority theistic view, we don't do that. So what's wrong with doing theories this way? Why can't it be that everything in the universe reduces to (and is explained by) matter, or matter plus logical laws, or form/matter substances, or monads, or sensations, or sensations plus logical categories, or whatever else looks convincing so long as we add that whatever it all else reduces to depends, in turn, on God?

By now it should be clear why this just won't do. The reductionist strategy is *itself unacceptable because it leaves a theory's content in the control of an alternative divinity belief*. Thus it fails to "bring every thought into captivity to Christ". The theory remains pagan in so far as its explanatory power is concerned, and belief in God is merely tacked onto the end of it the way the tail gets pinned on the birthday party donkey. For once everything is (supposedly) reduced to matter, or sensation, or whatnot, adding the claim that God created the whatnot contributes zilch to the theory. The theory's the same whether God is tacked onto it or not, and the enrichment it could have had from knowing God is lost to it. So if the biblical teaching about belief in God affecting and enriching all truth and knowledge is to be honored, not only the scholastic partition but also its ploy for neutralizing the pagan basis for reduction must be given up.

### C. Further Applications of the Regulative Religious Focus Hermeneutic

So far I've restricted my remarks about the regulative version of the religious focus watershed only to the impact of belief in God on science. It's understandable why this is the most prominent issue for examining this hermeneutic: it's the issue that caused this watershed to be distinguished in the first place, and it's still the one that gets the biggest share of time and ink among scholars. (In fact, some of that ink has been my own; I have used this hermeneutic to show how it leads to an understanding of Genesis 1 and 2 that does not contradict science.<sup>22</sup>) But it's not the only area in which benefits can be reaped from this hermeneutic, so I now want to close with some suggestions about how it can be applied to a few nonscientific issues as well.

The religious regulation of our thinking should also be remembered when it comes to ethics as well as science. There are specific teachings in scripture that have ethical import, to be sure; especially the commandment to love our neighbor. But that import is never the focus of what is being taught; the focus is always our relation to God. Even the love of our neighbor is grounded on the teaching that our neighbor is the image of God so that showing love to other humans is showing love to God. As an illustration of this focus with respect to ethics, consider the biblical condemnation of human sacrifice. There is no question but that the prophets forbid the sacrificing of humans (Deut. 12:31, 18:10). But the grounds they give for that teaching is not simply that

taking a life is unethical. Recall that in Genesis 22 offering a human sacrifice is exactly what God demanded of Abraham and exactly what God himself did in the crucifixion! Geerhardus Vos has pointed out how the general biblical attitude about sacrifice explains why the prophets' condemnation and God's commands are not at odds:

All biblical sacrifice rests on the idea that the gift of life to God, either in consecration or expiation, is necessary to the action or the restoration of religion.... The second principle underlying the idea is that man in the abnormal relations of sin is disqualified for offering this gift in his own person. Hence the principle of vicariousness is brought into play: one life takes the place of another.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, the prophetic condemnation was not primarily a declaration of the ethical *immorality* of human sacrifice, but of the religious *sinfulness* of humans which renders them not good enough to be sacrificed! The point is that what Malachi had said about animals for sacrifice applies equally to humans: "Cursed is the cheat who... sacrifices to the Lord what is unclean" (Mal. 1: 14). This is not to say that the practice isn't unethical as well; surely it would be a violation of the law of love for us to practice it absent a command from God. But the focus of the biblical text is on the relation of the practice to our covenant relation to God, rather than on its ethical standing.

Another example is the way scripture clearly teaches that we must live in a way that is just and loving to everyone, but at other points fails to apply that explicitly to such a glaring injustice such as slavery. It doesn't follow that such an omission is approval for slavery, but only that the focus of those texts (Philemon, e.g.) is religious rather than ethical. Philemon address the religiously proper attitudes for a Christian who is a slave as well as for a Christian who owns or oversees a slave.<sup>24</sup> It simply doesn't address slavery as an institution, and its failure to do so is not thereby tacit approval of that institution. That doesn't mean, however, that it's not incumbent on *us* to address it! I think it perfectly understandable that in the first century there would have been no point in condemning a worldwide institution concerning which no Christian so much as had a voice, let alone the opportunity to abolish. When the Empire fell, and other circumstances also changed, then the status of that institution became an issue needing to be addressed through the development of a Christian ethic and politics. To insist that whatever scripture doesn't condemn it must therefore approve, is but another way of making the mistake I quoted earlier from Henry Morris to the effect that scripture just *must* say something directly to any question of importance to us. As over against that attitude, the regulative version of the religious focus hermeneutic bids

us remember that scripture is about what God wants us to know concerning how we should relate to him, rather than about whatever we'd like to know.

A more general conclusion to be drawn from this application to ethics is that it is misleading to speak of scripture as sufficient for "matters of faith *and morals*" - as though these two items equally form the center of biblical teaching. The principles of justice and love are clearly commanded as requirements of a right relation to God. But there is no general theory of ethics to be found in scripture, and no detailed moral code is elaborated in it either (though there are a few specific commands and some provocative examples of applying them). This point amounts to urging that the encyclopedic assumption be avoided in understanding the relation of Christian teaching to ethics as well as to science. There are a host of vexing ethical issues on which the Bible is silent, just as it is on the natural sciences. The project of developing concrete moral and legal codes is a task that has been left to us to be carried out under the guidance of belief in God, i.e., by developing non-reductionist views of justice and love.

Another example of an issue that I think could profit from the regulative version of the religious-focus hermeneutic is the biblical teaching about the role and place of men and women in marriage and the family. The Bible frequently speaks of the father or husband as the head of the family and even as "the head of the wife" (Eph. 5:23). Many Bible interpreters find this troubling. Is this just an intolerable piece of male chauvinism or is it inspired teaching? And if it's inspired teaching, how can it be reconciled with Galatians 3:28, which declares that owing to our unity in Christ there is no longer any difference in covenantal standing between male or female?

Here our hermeneutic guides us by focussing on the headship of the husband and father as specifically religious, not general. It does not amount to saying men should always be in charge, let alone that the husband is the boss of the family including the wife, or that men are in general superior to women (a point Calvin already noted in his commentaries in the 16<sup>th</sup> century). Rather, the headship consists of a specific religious duty: God has laid on the husband and father the final earthly responsibility of the religious welfare for his wife and children. It is thus a new covenant example of a specific responsibility which parallels the way the old covenant made Patriarchs to be priests to their own families.

### **Concluding Unphilosophical Postscript**

If the variations of the transcendence (non-pantheist) side of the first watershed have been clear at all – I mean the scholastic partition, the fundamentalist, and the religious regulation positions - it should be apparent that many an average churchgoer unconsciously shifts between them in attempting to understand scripture. Sometimes this

happens even in the course of interpreting one and the same passage. These aren't compatible interpretive options, of course, but so long as they remain unconscious their incompatibility doesn't present itself. That is one of the reasons why many Christians would have little patience with what I've maintained here. For them the meaning of scripture is its literal meaning where "literal" means whatever they happened to think of when they first read it. Over against that, I maintain, we should maintain the traditional Protestant historical-grammatical idea of interpretation, but append to it an emphasis on scripture's religious focus and on its regulative role for the whole of life.

Finally, I wish to suggest that all this leads to the conclusion that we must recast the way we present the traditional Protestant claim that the scriptures are perspicuous. I agree with perspicuity if it means that in its simplest outline the gospel can be understood without scholarly investigations – hermeneutical theories included! The remarkable agreement of the creedal statements of every Christian denomination testifies to that point. But we do the average Christian no favor by promoting the idea that everyone is as qualified as anyone else to systematize those basic teachings, or to extend those teaching into murky areas, or to ferret out where traditional interpretations have been influenced by false beliefs despite the best intentions of their advocates. For sure, all believers need to be encouraged to read scripture. But they also need to be warned that it's difficult to be precise in detail about the relations between even its simplest doctrines without a grasp of the total literary, historical, and doctrinal context into which they fit. And they need to hear that even for those with the background to do that there is room for difference of interpretation when it comes to details.

So the moral of the story is that Christian scholars, teachers and preachers need to present their charges with the historical-grammatical, regulative religious focus hermeneutic, explain to them the interpretive options it leaves open, and encourage them to open-mindedness concerning those options.

## ENDNOTES

1. I say the views of revelation found in these traditions are "associated with" each view of the divine because there is no logical entailment between them. It would not be contradictory to hold the transcendence view of God and the pantheist view of scripture, and one version of Hinduism takes the Judeo-Christian view of its scriptures.
2. Systematic Theology. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, vol. 1), 238.
3. Ibid. p. 237
4. Ibid. pp. 237, 238.
5. Ibid. p. 239.
6. The Dynamics of Faith. (NY: Harper & Row, 1957), 96.
7. Ibid. p. 122.
8. Ibid. p. 14.
9. Ibid. p. 78.
10. Ibid. p. 51.
11. Ibid. pp. 51, 52.
12. Commentary on the First Book of Moses. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1948, vol. 1), 60.
13. Church Dogmatics. (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1964, vol. 111) part 1, sect. 41.
14. Omitted here is any discussion of whether the definite content is to be taken as having a four-fold interpretation as medieval commentators assumed, or is to be tackled by historical-grammatical analysis to ascertain the literal meaning of the text, as held by the Reformers. I take that battle to be over and assume here the historical-grammatical view, and I understand the "literal" meaning of a text to be determined by grammar, historical setting, literary form, and

universe of discourse.

In the case of the Bible, however, it must be added that in addition to its human authors the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author so that the literal intent of a text is often *more* than the intent of its human author(s) in the historical setting of its writing. But the more, it seems to me, must build on the human author's text which is therefore the starting point for all interpretation.

15. Of course this doesn't refer to covenant contents in complete isolation from every other sort of information. It would have to mean the covenant contents plus at least whatever else would have to be true for them to be true.

16. Genesis and Geology, C.C. Gillespie. (NY: Harper & Bros., 1959), 53.

17. The History of Modern Creationism, (San Diego: Master Books, 1984),

96. On this view, however, it would seem far more inconceivable that the Bible didn't tip us off to the germ theory of disease. That was a much more pressing need than knowing the age of the earth!

18. The Battle for the Bible. (Grand rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 18.

19. Some defenders of this point have gone so far as taking it to require that those who don't believe in God therefore don't really know anything at all! But Bible writers themselves often speak of unbelievers as knowing a wide variety of things, so I take it that failure to know God only *partially* falsifies the rest of their knowledge. It should also be noted that the biblical phrasing of the point is always such that knowing God is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for avoiding the (partial) error which is unavoidable for unbelievers; that is, knowing God makes it possible to avoid, but does not guarantee that believers will avoid, the error that is unavoidable to unbelievers. This will be explained shortly.

20. The classic exposition of this option is Herman Dooyeweerd's A New Critique of Theoretical Thought (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co, 1955), 4 vols.

21. There are many senses of the term "reduction" used in both science and philosophy. I am here describing only the ones I find religiously objectionable. For a more precise description of the objectionable senses of "reduction", see The Myth of Religious Neutrality (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 359.

22. "Genesis on the Origin of the Human Race" in Perspectives on Science & Christian Faith, Vol.

43, no. 1, March, 1991, pp. 2 - 13. See also chapter 5 of Knowing with the Heart (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007) and “Is Theism Compatible with Evolution?” in Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics: Philosophical, Theological, and Scientific Perspectives, Ed. R. Pennock. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 513 - 536.

23. Biblical Theology, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), 92 - 93.

24. We should remember in this connection that what the Law of Moses called “slavery,” is a very restricted notion we would call “voluntary indentured servitude”. There is no reason to think that the writers of the N.T. - who were all Jews so far as we know - did not tacitly presuppose *at least* such Mosaic restrictions as morally appropriate for Christians.