

BRIEF REMARKS ON THE NEED FOR A SCIENTIFIC THEOLOGY

by John C. Godbey

A scientific theology is a systematic statement concerning the nature and bases of human values that utilizes the findings and the correlative methods of the sciences. As a systematic statement, it represents a new departure in the discipline of systematic theology.

In Christian history, systematic theology was given an initial, disciplined form by Origen (d. 254), who utilized the assumptions and structure of Platonic philosophy to interpret the structure and content of the Christian faith.¹ Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) utilized the assumptions and structure of Aristotelian philosophy to interpret the structure and content of both revelation and the Christian tradition.² Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834) avowedly derived both the structure and the content of his systematic theology from the nature of the Christian experience of "absolute dependence."³ Paul Tillich structured his systematic theology by means of a "method of correlation" which "explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence."⁴

A new departure, envisioning a scientific theology, was called for in the second half of the nineteenth century by a Unitarian minister, Francis Ellingwood Abbot, who was one of the founders of the Free Religious Association. In describing Abbot's view, Stow Persons writes:

Whatever the ultimate answers, they would be arrived at by means of scientific investigation on the assumption that only the scientific method, formulating conclusions acceptable to the competently qualified authorities, could satisfy the critical intelligence. Abbot was the first to concede that in its existing state science was unprepared to solve religious problems. The skepticism of the age was in fact largely due to the disintegrating effects upon religious dogma of a corpus of scientific knowledge still confined to natural phenomena. But beyond physical science lay universal science, the investigation of the data of human experience in any chosen aspect according to the established scientific procedure of testing hypotheses arrived at inductively and deductively by reference to the relevant facts. The beginnings of scientific investigation of religion were already being made with studies of comparative religious beliefs and institutions or with critical analysis of religious records in their historical

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context. Tentative as these beginnings were they pointed to the day when scholars imbued with the scientific spirit would be prepared to supply definitive answers to the great questions of causation, freedom, purpose in organic development, moral sentiment, and religious affections.⁵

In his own century, Abbot's efforts received little attention. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, a few scholars in religion and in the sciences are beginning to structure a new approach in theology by utilizing the findings and the correlative methods of the sciences. Donald Harrington states the urgency of such a task: "A new type of faith, capable of speaking in the scientific idiom of our time, and capable of reconciling the religious values of the past with the scientific knowledge of the present, is the issue of the hour for which an answer must be found."⁶

A contemporary scientific theology would not have the same content as earlier systematic theologies, nor would it (at present) have the same comprehensive scope. Its content would be limited by the necessity of determining the connectibility⁷ of its substantive assertions with empirical referents. Its scope would expand as scientific exploration of the nature and bases of human values⁸ permitted the integration of the findings of the various scientific disciplines into a coherent, applicable structure. This scope can be, in exploration, understood to include the findings of a single science or group of sciences, which findings are, at present, only partially integrated with the findings of other scientific disciplines. In a statement of the content of a scientific theology as such, however, the scope would be restricted to the inclusion of those connectible assertions concerning human values that cohere with the findings of other scientific disciplines.

Since it is directed toward the investigation of the nature and bases of human values, a scientific theology would be a systematic structure that provides a provisional identification of that which is of sovereign worth in all human living.⁹ From this standpoint, it would constitute a theology, for it would identify (in however provisional form) the "source of human good." That structure or process which makes possible life, human life, and human values may or may not be referred to as God. The use of the term "God," with the appropriate redefinition of the content of such a term, is, however, consistent with the (at least partial) designation by such a systematic statement of that structure or process which, in sovereign power, provides the existence of, and determines the conditions for the continued existence of, all human living. The development of connectible assertions concerning various aspects of human experience of values¹⁰ will provide the bases for an appro-

priate redefinition of theological terms in such form as to disclose the relationship of specific aspects of (or types of) human experience of values to the provider and judge of human living. These aspects of the systematic statement would, indeed, be doctrines of grace and judgment. (Thus, the language of worship, as a communal celebration of central human values, will not be identical with, but can be, at least partially, connectible with the assertions of a scientific theology.)

NOTES

1. "His work, *De principiis* [was] the first attempt to construct a system of dogmatics" (Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles E. Hay, 2 vols. [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1954], 1:146). "Origen's dogmatic work *Περὶ Ἀρχῶν*, which has been preserved in a Latin translation entitled *De Principiis* (4 vols.) . . . was the first attempt to present a comprehensive system of Christian doctrine by founding it on the Scripture and the Apostolic tradition, and then building it up with the philosophical knowledge of the age" (J. L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946], 1:83).
2. "The great achievement of Thomas Aquinas was setting forth the relation of reason and faith in such fashion that those to whom the Aristotelian philosophy was definitive could feel that they might consistently remain Christians" (Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* [London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, n.d.], p. 510).
3. Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology: Schleiermacher to Barth* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1937), pp. 60-63; Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 123.
4. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:60.
5. Stow Persons, *Free Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1947), p. 37. Cf. Francis Ellingwood Abbot, *Scientific Theism* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1888).
6. Donald Szanthe Harrington, "Science and the Search for a Rational Religious Faith," *Zygon* 1, no. 1 (March 1966):98.
7. Richard von Mises, *Positivism: A Study in Human Understanding* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1956), pp. 69-79.
8. Clyde Kluckhohn, "The Scientific Study of Values and Contemporary Civilization," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 102, no. 5 (October 1958): 872-76; this article was reprinted in *Zygon* 1, no. 3 (September 1966):230-243.
9. Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Wrestle of Religion with Truth* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), pp. 148 ff.; Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), pp. 49-50, 304-9.
10. Alfred E. Emerson, "Dynamic Homeostasis: A Unifying Principle in Organic, Social, and Ethical Evolution," *Zygon* 3, no. 2 (June 1968):129-68.