

Nuances in Public Theology

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A distinctive of good scholarship is that it attends to the nuances of life and our world. As we host public lectures and make them available in written and recorded versions we have thus called this series of lectures and recordings *Nuances in Public Theology*.

The Bible and Other Texts: The Character of Scripture and its Role in our Scholarship

Craig G. Bartholomew

Director of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge

GLORY

Academic work – the quest for knowledge - is not better than other types of work but it does have its unique contribution that it makes and thus its own glory. To be busy in God's world exploring and investigating rationally how it works and how to steward it so that Christ's reputation is enhanced in the world is a wonderful and privileged vocation. For those of us called into academia there is something about it that stirs our deep desires and generally we are the sort of people who love books, stationery, notebooks, libraries, bookstores, and software that enhances our work.

However, like all work, academic work is not easy and it has its unique challenges. Research does not yield as quickly as we would like it to, we find ourselves going down false trails and have to start again, long periods of solitude that rigorous academia demands are not always easy, and so on and so forth.

THE GAP

The challenges of academic work make this topic especially important. If you are a Christian, love Jesus, and attend to the Bible as the place par excellence where you hear God's address, then it is vital that a gap does not develop between your devotional life and your academic work. If you travel on the London Underground you will hear the announcement "Mind the Gap" at certain stations, and this is good advice for Christian academics too. The post-enlightenment university world has a vested interest – if not a demand – that faith be kept out of scholarship, and it is far too easy to find oneself inhabiting two very different worlds and becoming increasingly unsure how they relate

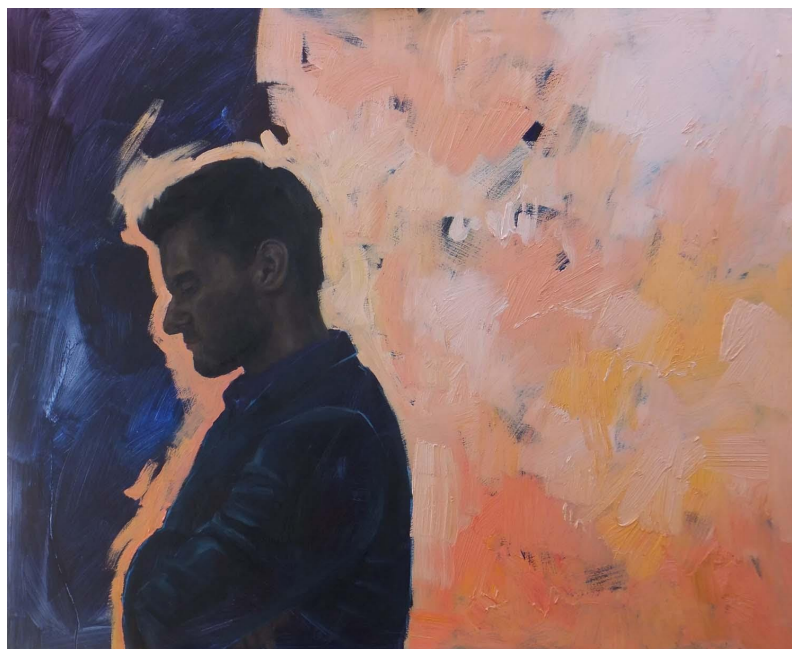
to each other. Your expertise in your disciplinary speciality can grow in leaps and bounds while your faith knowledge remains the same, and eventually the tension between the two can become unsustainable. The temptation then becomes either to abandon or marginalise your faith or to abandon academia. Indeed, one of the major sociologists of the modern era, Max Weber, thinks this is inevitable.

Weber writes: “today no one can really doubt in his heart of hearts that science is alien to God - whether or not he admits it to himself. Release from the rationalism and intellectualism of science is the fundamental premise of life in communion with the divine.”¹ He asserts that those who cannot endure this “release” should return to the arms of the churches. However, by doing so “he will inevitably be forced to make a ‘sacrifice of the intellect’.”²

Weber’s is a false dichotomy, as much as it remains alive and well today, especially amidst the hardening secularism of the West. You therefore need to be well equipped with tools to help you negotiate this gap successfully as a Christian scholar. What tools do you need?

A SPADE

Quite understandably most of us devote our time to what we can call *the surface level* of our disciplines. If you are studying psychology then you will attend to psychological studies, pathologies, therapeutic theories and techniques, etc. If you are in a laboratory then you will focus on experiments, gathering and



Janna Prinsloo: *In the Shadows*

Find more of her exquisite work [here](#) and [here](#).

¹ Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*. Hackett Classics. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2204). Kindle Edition.

² Ibid.

collating data, etc. If you are an historian then there is probably a period or event that is your particular concern, and your energy will be directed towards it. This is perfectly normal and as we would expect.

However, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues rightly that in any discipline you can ask deeper and deeper questions until you get to the really deep questions, and that, he says, is *philosophy*. In my opinion these deep questions are both philosophical and theological, but you get the point. One way to imagine this is to think of your discipline as an ice-cream cone. It would be strange to buy an ice-cream just for the cone. What really interests us is the Italian gelato, the delicious chocolate chip mint ice-cream, or the marvellous vanilla. However, we all know that to enjoy your ice-cream you need a cone. Often it is only when your cone starts leaking that you realise that eating ice-cream without a good cone is no fun!

All academic disciplines have foundations or cones, and if we wish to “Mind the Gap” then we do well to attend to the cone or foundations of our disciplines. It may be that as a scientist you have been fortunate enough to have done an excellent course on philosophy of science, or perhaps as an historian you had to do a course on historiography, and it turned out to be surprisingly good! My sense is that this is the exception rather than the rule. What Stephen Toulmin calls the standard narrative of modernity remains widely in place and it assumes that what modern universities do is normal, autonomous, neutral scientific study. If you assume this then there is very little, if any, need to explore the foundations of your discipline. However, for all its many gifts – and they are many! – modernity is far from neutral and straightforwardly scientific and rational. But you will only start to see this when you get out *your spade* and start to dig down in your discipline until you get to those really deep questions that Taylor refers to.

A LAMP

If you are going to dig deep and go underground then you need a lamp so that you can see. If you dig down deep what are you likely to see? Of course, to a significant extent this will vary from discipline to discipline but there will also be commonalities. Taylor has already given us a major clue; you will bump into *philosophy*. Oh no, I can imagine

some of you saying. There is a good reason why I avoided the humanities and now I'm being dragged back into them!

Well, yes! But this is not a call to become a philosopher, although that is a beautiful calling, but it is a call to learn enough philosophy to be able to see what you are bumping into when you excavate your discipline to its foundations. There are many different definitions of philosophy. The one I work with is that to philosophise is to discern the structure of creation and to describe, systematically, that is in logical order, what is subject to that structure.³ There are three major areas of philosophy:

- *Ontology*, or the nature of reality
- *Epistemology*, which I define as how to go about knowing something so that you can trust the results of the knowing process
- *Anthropology*, or the view of the human person.

Now think about these three areas for a moment without getting confused by the big words. No science can proceed without making some *ontological* assumption; for example, the assumption that reality is knowable. No academic project or class can move forward without making some assumptions about how to know that subject truly, *epistemology*. And in all academic disciplines some assumption about what it means to be human will be at work, *anthropology*. Such foundations are simply unavoidable. Alas, far too often in our universities they are assumed without ever being examined.

Once you subject them to examination you will get a shock. Academics who study these three areas hold a wide range of very different and contradictory views about them. And although they operate below the surface of disciplines, the views you take on these areas will and do shape your discipline at the surface level in different ways. Thus, another way to mind the gap is to be on the lookout for ways in which these

³ Taken from L. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian Philosophy*.

subterranean roots are influencing your discipline at the surface level. Taking your lamp below ground will, ironically, help you to see more clearly above ground.

Good news is that recent decades have witnessed a truly remarkable renaissance of Christian philosophy. In 1980 *Time* magazine reported that God was making a comeback, and in philosophy. It named Alvin Plantinga as the most prominent Protestant philosopher of religion. Plantinga has gone on to produce a truly extraordinary corpus of work, including a three -volume work on epistemology published by OUP, and more recently a marvellous book on faith and science called *Where the Conflict Really Lies*. And many others have accompanied Plantinga on this journey of renewal, philosophers like Bill Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff, C. Stephen Evans and a whole new generation of younger scholars. The point is that if you are looking for serious Christian reflection on the major areas of philosophy, then you are spoilt for choice.



Titia Ballot: *Transcendental Earth*
See her wonderful work [here](#)

APPLES

But you may well ask, where does the Bible fit in all of this? If, as I believe, the Bible is God's Word *for all of life*, then this is an excellent, indispensable question. We should take the Bible as God's authoritative Word in our disciplines, but how? It is one thing to confess the inerrancy of the Bible, quite another to know *how* the Bible functions authoritatively in relation to one's studies.

Let me begin by noting *what the Bible is not*. It surely teaches us many truths but it is not an academic textbook, a philosophy textbook, or a scientific manual. Too often we want to compare the Bible directly with our disciplines and we end up comparing apples with oranges, whereas what you want is to compare apples with apples.

Now don't get me wrong. There are some areas in which the Bible instructs us which bear directly on academic work. If you are studying the family, for example, then the Bible has much to teach us although even here you will need to take into account the historical development of the family and domesticity, etc. However, with most of our disciplines, say astrophysics or economics or psychiatry, there is little direct correlation between the Bible and our studies. Indeed, on the whole the Bible never aims to provide such data.

What then does the Bible provide us with? In my opinion a helpful way to get at this is to say the Bible *orients us to the world* in a particular, fully trustworthy way. In my definition of philosophy above, for example, you will note that I refer to the world as God's *creation*. This orientation comes from the Bible. When it comes to anthropology, the Bible provides us with myriad vital clues as to what it means to be human in God's creation, but without ever giving us a scientific theory of the human person. We must take these clues seriously but without treating them *as* a scientific theory. Another way of expressing what the Bible does is to say that it provides us with a *worldview*, a pre-theoretical orientation towards ourselves and the world.

So far, so good. But how does this help us with the Bible and our disciplines? Well, if you take up your lamp again and go even deeper into your disciplines, beyond even the philosophical foundations you will find similar worldviews or basic orientations. In other words, you will find apples!, and it is here that the comparison between the orientation of the Bible and the orientations assumed in your discipline can be rightly and immediately compared.

This is helpful in so many ways. There is a considerable literature available on a Christian worldview, and once you are able to articulate the contours of a Christian worldview, you can not only work down your discipline until you compare apples with apples, but you can also make a Christian worldview your starting point and work up to your

discipline, exploring what effect a biblical orientation has on your studies. Fortunately, there are good examples of this type of Christian work in all disciplines nowadays.

KNEES



Rembrandt van Rijn: *David in Prayer*
 From the Rijks Museum [online Rijks Studio](https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/works-of-art/1820-BM-BK-AK-1820-1820)

Finally, you need well-worn knees! Prayer and listening to the Bible for God's address are not somehow separate from the most rigorous scholarship. They go together. Serious academic work should be, and in our case, *must be* accompanied by the deepest devotion. Eugene Peterson, whose writings on Christian spirituality are very helpful, notes that the spirituality for different vocations will have its own unique dimensions. For example, sometimes as academics we learn to read very fast but then find the slow reading the Bible calls for difficult. Even as you exult in your work as a Christian scholar, I encourage you to make sure that your life is growing ever more deeply into the very life of Christ itself.



The Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge
 Charity registered in England and Wales
 Charity Number: 1191741
 Margaret Beaufort Institute
 12-14 Grange Road
 Cambridge
 CB3 9DU