

## SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AS SCIENCE: B. B. WARFIELD'S IDEA OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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"Systematic Theology... is a science, and is to be conceived as a science and treated as a science."<sup>1</sup> In our age when the relational, communal, and aesthetic elements of theology are given enormous emphasis in the Christian world (including evangelicalism), Warfield's idea of Systematic Theology<sup>2</sup> as *a science* might easily sound modernistic, impersonal, cold, and mechanistic. Warfield can be a soft target for the postmodern taste that aims to distance itself from anything that seems to be rooted in Enlightenment Rationalism. The last thing the postmodern ethos wants to call theology is "science." If anything, theology is an art, or rather, simply a relationship or a communal experience. But even the more theologically conscious segments of evangelicalism, and those Christians who are committed to the historical truths of Protestant orthodoxy, often have problems with Warfield's approach.<sup>3</sup> Their criticisms come from various directions. Some claim that theology is certainly more than a science. Science is about facts and phenomena, theology is about revelation and salvation; theology is therefore not bound by the limitations of science. Others contrast science (that is the study of the cosmos) with theology (the subject-matter of which is the *Creator* of the cosmos), and emphasize the infinite qualitative difference between the Creator and his creation. How could we ever make God an *object* of our investigations? Probably the most deadly charge against Warfield's definition comes from some church historians who bring the accusation of *lifelessness* against it. According to Sydney Ahlstrom, in the Old Princeton tradition (which includes Warfield) Reformed theology was "emptied of its most dynamic element," resulting in "[a] kind of rationalistic *rigor mortis*" that "made traditional doctrines so lifeless and static that a new theological turn was virtually inevitable."<sup>4</sup> In the opinion of George Marsden, at Princeton truth was seen as an objective statement of facts, and the subjective element of truth was eliminated almost completely.<sup>5</sup> For contemporary ears, the connotation of calling theology a *science* is not much different from these descriptions. It invokes lifelessness, lack of dynamism, and

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<sup>1</sup> B. B. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* Vol. 7 No. 26 (1896), 244.

<sup>2</sup> Conforming to Warfield's use, I will write Systematic Theology with capital letters.

<sup>3</sup> In a recent article of *Presbyterion*, David P. Smith has given a long list of scholars who criticized Warfield and Old Princeton for their indebtedness to Scottish Common Sense Realism, and a generally rationalistic epistemology. (David P. Smith, "Warfield, Systematic Theology, and the Preacher's Task," *Presbyterion*, 35/2 [Fall 2009]: 95-115.)

<sup>4</sup> The quotations are taken from Smith, "Warfield, Systematic Theology, and the Preacher's Task," 100.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

the rigidity of an objectivist methodology which lacks relational warmth. There are many more potential objections to calling theology a *science*, I myself will raise some of them on these pages. But before doing that, it is important to give Warfield a fair hearing. It is important to examine and understand what he really meant by calling Systematic Theology a science. It would be wrong to attribute to Warfield thoughts that he never believed or agreed with. Jesus taught us to do unto others as we want them to do unto us. We owe Warfield the respect that we would listen to him before we become judges of his ideas. None of us wins if we defeat a straw-man, but we can disgrace the memory of a servant of the Lord by misrepresenting his ideas.

## I. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AS SCIENCE

Although Systematic Theology is not an empirical science, dependent upon an “experimental method,”<sup>6</sup> it is nevertheless a science, says Warfield, because it brings order and harmony into what we know about God and his relation to the world. Systematic Theology is practically synonymous with “Scientific Theology,” because “it presents its material in the form of a system.”<sup>7</sup> It is also synonymous with “Philosophical Theology,” because “philosophy reduces the sciences to order and harmony,”<sup>8</sup> and so does Systematic Theology to the other disciplines. Philosophy is the *scientia scientiarum*. Warfield quotes D. W. Simon who says, “Its function is so to grasp the whole, that every part shall find its proper place therein, and the parts, that they shall find an organic whole.”<sup>9</sup> This second term (“Philosophical Theology”) is even more closely related to Systematic Theology, because just as there are many sciences but only one philosophy (a statement that might be seriously questioned today),<sup>10</sup> there are many theologies but only one Systematic Theology. Systematic Theology is a science, but it is a science in the sense philosophy is a science above all other sciences.

Warfield emphasizes that Systematic Theology is not a *historical* discipline. Systematic Theology “seeks to discover, not what has been or is held to be true, but what is ideally true.”<sup>11</sup> The aim of Systematic Theology is to organize absolute truth into a concatenated system. Historical disciplines describe what people at a certain point of time and a certain place held to be true, Systematic Theology however aims to describe what is *absolutely* true. From this follows, says Warfield,

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<sup>6</sup> Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” 243.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 244.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Obviously, Warfield was not denying that there were various contradictory philosophies, but he emphasized that *by principle* the task of philosophy is a systematizing task, and it aims to organize all other sciences into one unified system. “Accordingly, there are many sciences, and but one philosophy.” (Ibid.)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 245.

that there is only *one* Systematic Theology. There can be methodological divisions within theology, but “all these are but designations of method of procedure in dealing with the one whole.”<sup>12</sup> As an extension of Warfield’s approach, we could say today that Systematic Theology is not a *sociological* discipline, either. Systematic Theology is not simply the belief system of a religious group of a particular culture, that could have rival (or parallel) systems, nor is it simply the expression of communal convictions. It is rather the system of all that is true independently of cultures and communal convictions.

The assertion that Systematic Theology is science determines the way Warfield understands the essential nature of Systematic Theology. “For the very existence of science, three things are presupposed: (1) the reality of its subject-matter; (2) the capacity of the human mind to apprehend, receive into itself, and rationalize this subject-matter; and (3) some medium of communication by which the subject-matter is brought before the mind and presented to it for apprehension.”<sup>13</sup> This is true of all sciences. If Systematic Theology is a science, it also has a subject matter, a receptive faculty, and a medium. The subject-matter is God and his relation to his creatures. The receptive faculty is the human mind and man’s religious nature. The medium is divine revelation. Systematic Theology depends on these three things: the existence of God, the mind and religious nature of man, and divine revelation. The knowledge of the subject-matter is known when the objective medium brings it to the subjective mind of men that they may perceive it and understand it. Systematic Theology is therefore not different from any other sciences, except that its subject-matter is *God*, the human faculty needed is *religious*, and the nature of the objective medium is *divine revelation*.

From this Warfield makes the following definition of theology: “Theology is therefore that science which treats of God and of the relations between God and the universe.”<sup>14</sup> This definition makes the subject-matter the starting point, and differs from those definitions of theology that derive from the sources of theology. Warfield’s example is the school of Schleiermacher, which defines theology as “the science of faith,” and the outgrowth of the same subjective tendency that defines theology as “the science of religion” or “the science of the Christian religion.” By “religion” Warfield means religious practice, and by “Christian religion” he means a historical conception that describes religious belief and practice at a certain point of time and place. Neither of them are adequate foundations for a Systematic Theology. Warfield wants to keep the science of theology and the science of religion separate from each other as different disciplines. The subject matter of the science of theology is *objective*, the subject matter of the science of religion is *subjective*. If our definition of Systematic Theology derives from the science of religion, it has “the effect of lowering the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 246.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 248.

data of theology to the level of the aspirations and imaginings of man's own heart."<sup>15</sup> It reduces theology to "a branch of psychology."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, if we derive our definition of theology from the Christian religion, we reduce it to a historical science, which is not anymore about absolute truth, nor is a seeking of what is ideally true. Warfield therefore opposes Christo-centric theologies and argues that "theology as a science is and must be Theo-centric."<sup>17</sup> It would be a mistake to attribute Warfield a denial of the importance of revelation through the incarnate Word. What he denies is that theology can have a center that is part of a historical development of God's relation to the world rather than the organizing principle of everything: God himself. According to Warfield "there can be but one centre about which so comprehensive a subject-matter can be organized - the conception of God."<sup>18</sup> Whether Warfield is right when he thinks that a Christo-centric definition of theology would be the definition of a historical science, is another question.

The source of theology is *revelation*. Revelation is "the medium by which the facts concerning God and His relations to His creatures are brought before men's minds, and so made the subject-matter of a possible science."<sup>19</sup> Revelation is the only source of revelation. Nothing can be known about the subject-matter of theology without the medium of revelation. One might think (and a Barthian would certainly hope) that this excludes all forms of natural theology in Warfield's idea of Systematic Theology, but this is not simply the case. Warfield emphasizes that there are "diverse manners" in which God reveals and has revealed himself. God has never left man without witness of his eternal power and Godhead. God has revealed himself through the visible things of nature, the constitution of the human mind, the conscience of man, through providence, through the exercises of grace, the open vision of the prophets, through the written Word, and through "the divine life of the Word Himself."<sup>20</sup> Warfield wants to take into account all forms of revelation when he determines the sole source of Systematic Theology. Long before Barth he certainly affirms that God revealed himself through his incarnate Word. He also affirms with all orthodox Protestants that the Scriptures are God's revelation to men. But Warfield also believes that Systematic Theology should take into account *all forms* of revelation as sources of true knowledge that Systematic Theology should build on. "It is with no reserve that we accept all these sources of knowledge of God - nature, providence, Christian experience - as true and valid sources... as revelations of God, and as such to be placed alongside of the revelations in the written Word

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 249-50.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 250.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

and wrought with them into one system."<sup>21</sup> Warfield sees the task of Systematic Theology in building all the knowledge coming from all the forms of revelation into one all-comprehending system.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to see all forms of revelation as *equally* valid sources, without making important distinctions among them. Warfield emphasizes that there are differences among the various manifestations of God "in the amount of revelation they give, the clearness of their message, the ease and certainty with which they may be interpreted, or the importance of the special truths which they are fitted to convey."<sup>22</sup> In fact, it is a priori likely that if God reveals himself in diverse manners, the diverse messages will have "divers degrees of importance, delivered with diverse degrees of clearness."<sup>23</sup> The revelation of God in the written Word is "easily shown not only to be incomparably superior to all other manifestations of Him... but also to contain the sole discovery of much that it is most important for the soul to know as to its state and destiny, and of much that is precious in our whole body of theological knowledge."<sup>24</sup> The revelation of God in the written Word contains the only *authentic* records of the revelation of God in the incarnate Word. We would not know trustworthy reports of the revelation of God in Jesus without the revelation of the Scriptures. Hence, after putting all forms of revelation alongside the Bible as sources for Systematic Theology, Warfield makes the Bible the *norm* of interpretation for other manifestations. The lucidity of God's self-revelation in the written Word and the "glorious character of the discoveries made in it throws all other manifestations into comparative shadow."<sup>25</sup> As a result "the theologian must yet refuse to give these sources of knowledge a place alongside of the written Word, in any other sense than that he gladly admits that they, alike with it, but in unspeakably lower measure, do tell us of God."<sup>26</sup>

Warfield's understanding of *natural revelation* and natural theology is to be seen in light of the above distinction. He rejects those attempts that seek to "still the cravings of their souls with a purely natural theology."<sup>27</sup> "The natural result of resting on the revelations of nature is despair; while the inevitable end of making our appeal to even the Christian heart is to make for ourselves refuges of lies in which there is neither truth nor safety."<sup>28</sup> Warfield does accept the validity of inferences from the nature of the Christian life, but warns us of overstepping the limitations of such inferences. The Bible has to remain the norm for interpreting the revelations of nature. "[T]he Holy Scriptures are the source of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 251.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 252.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

theology in not only a degree, but also a sense in which nothing else is.”<sup>29</sup> This means that Systematic Theology relies on natural revelation to a degree, but it is controlled by the clearer and more trustworthy norm of the written Word. On the other hand, as we shall see, Warfield places Apologetics at the doorsteps of Systematic Theology, and this will raise the question of the role of natural theology at another level.

Warfield sees Systematic Theology as the “crown and head” of all theological disciplines. He uses the “usual fourfold distribution”<sup>30</sup> of the theological disciplines into Exegetical Theology, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology, and adds two more branches: Apologetical Theology and Biblical Theology. Biblical Theology is “the ripest fruit of Exegetics.”<sup>31</sup> Its task is to organize the scattered results of Exegetical Theology into one whole, either within a biblical book, a body of books, or the entire Scriptures. Systematic Theology does not directly build on the results of Exegetics; “it is founded on the final and complete results of exegesis as exhibited in Biblical Theology.”<sup>32</sup> Systematic Theology must take into account the systematizing work *within* the Scriptures and its books before it can utilize the results of exegesis for a system outside the pages of the Bible. “Not exegesis itself, then, but Biblical Theology, provides the material for Systematic Theology.”<sup>33</sup> Warfield compares the relationships of exegesis, Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology with each other to the building up of an army. Exegesis is the recruiting of the soldiers: “it draws out from the mass of mankind the men who are to constitute the army.”<sup>34</sup> “Biblical Theology organizes these into companies and regiments and corps, arranged into marching order and accoutered into service. Systematic Theology combines these companies and regiments and corps into an army.”<sup>35</sup> He admits that the illustration is imperfect, it nevertheless highlights the distinctions and the progression of systematizing from one step to the other.

Warfield’s emphasis on the mediating role of Biblical Theology provides a necessary safeguard against insufficient proof-texting methods, too prevalent in evangelical circles. His views on Apologetical Theology can be more controversial, however. “Apologetical Theology prepares the way for all theology by establishing its necessary presuppositions without which no theology is possible.”<sup>36</sup> What are these presuppositions? Warfield seems to be consistent in emphasizing four necessary presuppositions for theology: 1) The existence and essential nature of God, 2) the religious nature of man, 3) the possibility of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 254.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 255.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 256.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 257.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 254.

revelation, and 4) the actual realization of revelation in the Bible.<sup>37</sup> The ultimate purpose of Apologetical Theology therefore is to place the Scriptures in our hands “for investigation and study.”<sup>38</sup> Our knowledge of God should rest on the Bible, because the Bible is the clearest and most trustworthy form of revelation. But Apologetical Theology is at the “entrance” of the other theological disciplines: Apologetics - Exegetics - Biblical Theology - Systematics.<sup>39</sup> Through the mediation of exegesis and Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology receives biblical truths from the hands of Apologetics. Apologetical Theology also provides revealed truths for Systematic Theology directly, without the mediation of Exegetical and Biblical Theology. These truths are about the existence and essential nature of God, the religious nature of men, and the possibility of revelation. Apologetics provides Systematic Theology with historical arguments about Christianity, too. (To this are added the similarly historical sources of Historical Theology.) Apologetics is therefore a crucial and necessary discipline not only for persuasion but also as a foundation for the task of Systematic Theology. This raises epistemological problems that we will discuss later.

If theology is a science, as Warfield believes, its relationship to other sciences is an important question. Warfield deals with this, too. He puts theology above all other sciences the same way he put Systematic Theology at the top of the theological disciplines. “The place that theology, as the scientific presentation of the facts that are known concerning God and His relations, claims for itself, within the circle of the sciences, is an equally high one with that which it claims among the theological disciplines.”<sup>40</sup> Because of its subject-matter, theology has the closest relations with the highest of the other sciences, Ethics, but since theology is the clearest and most important revelation of God, it is above Ethics, too. On the other hand, this high position that theology claims for itself is not a position that is separate from the sphere of the sciences. For Warfield (as an orthodox Calvinist), there is only one reality, one sphere of knowledge and existence. Theology is “a constituent member of the closely interrelated and mutually interacting organism of the sciences.”<sup>41</sup> Theology in some measure touches all sciences, because every science “is occupied with the discovery of the modes of the divine action, and as such might be considered a branch of theology.”<sup>42</sup> Hence the place of theology can be determined among the other sciences. There is nothing outside God (in him we live, move, and have our

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. See also “The Right of Systematic Theology,” in John E. Meeter (ed.), *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield II*. (Nutley, New Jersey, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973), 219.

<sup>38</sup> Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” 254.

<sup>39</sup> On page 262 of “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” Warfield gives a graphic representation of the relations of the theological disciplines to each other, and puts Apologetical Theology on the top, Systematic Theology being on the bottom of the drawing. (Progression is from top to bottom.)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

being), therefore the science of God and his relations is the necessary ground of every branch of science. "Theology, thus, as the science which treats of God, lies at the root of all sciences. It is true that each could exist without it, in a sense and in some degree; but through it alone can any one of them reach its true dignity."<sup>43</sup> Autonomous human beings in their rebellion against God can achieve great goals, and this is true of the sciences, as well, but every science is incomplete without an understanding of God and his relations to the world. "It is only in theology, therefore, that the other sciences find their completion."<sup>44</sup> "Theology, formally speaking, is accordingly the apex of the pyramid of the sciences, by which the structure is perfected."<sup>45</sup> Theology is not only at the roots and is the ground of all other sciences, it is also their capstone. It relates to the other sciences as Systematic Theology relates to the other branches of theology. "All other sciences are subsidiary to it, and it builds its fabric out of the material supplied by them."<sup>46</sup>

According to Warfield, theology has an immense advantage over all other sciences, inasmuch as it relies on written revelation rather than facts conveyed in life. The interpretation of a written document – especially when it intends to convey a plain message – is much easier than the interpretation of facts. This explains why theology was "the first-born of the sciences."<sup>47</sup> And this is why theology is "nearer perfection than any other science."<sup>48</sup> Theology is still a *progressive* science, and in that regard it is not different from sciences in general. Its progression does not consist, however, in the revelation of new truths that has not been known before, it is more a progressive *understanding* of the old truths revealed in the closed canon of the Scriptures. As John Robinson once said, "God hath more truth yet to break forth from His holy Word."<sup>49</sup> Warfield sees this progression in the history of dogma, as "the body of Christian truth has come down to us in the form of an organic growth; and we can conceive of the completed structure as the ripened fruit of the ages, as truly as we can think of it as the perfected result of the exegetical discipline."<sup>50</sup> Warfield compares the progressive development of theology to the building of a great medieval cathedral. Each generation of theologians builds on the basis of the already ascertained truth of its predecessor. "What if it is not ours to lay foundations?" asks Warfield. "Let us rejoice that that work has been done! Happy are we if our God will permit us to bring a single capstone into place! This fabric is not a house of cards to be built and blown down again an hundred times a day... it is a miracle of art to which all ages and lands bring their varied tribute."<sup>51</sup> The history

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 260.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 262.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 263.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 265.



of theology must be a progressive orthodoxy in which “the subtle Greek laid the foundations; the law-loving Roman raised high the walls; and all the perspicuity of France and ideality of Germany and systematization of Holland and deep sobriety of Britain”<sup>52</sup> perfect the structure.

This highly optimistic view of theology reflects the optimism of the pre-WWI Western cultural climate that Warfield was obviously part of. But Warfield saw clearly that the goal of theology was not the same as the goal of any other sciences. Theology is an eminently practical science. Besides studying the most glorious subject-matter, God and his relations to the world, the purpose of theology is “to save and sanctify souls.”<sup>53</sup> It is this practical concern that drives the progress of this science. It is a historical fact that “throughout all the ages every advance in the scientific statement of theological truth has been made in response to a practical demand, and has been made in a distinctly practical interest.”<sup>54</sup> In this sense theology is not an abstract discipline. Theology is always in order to life and for the purpose of correction and edification. The systematization of truths serves exactly the purpose of making “strong and living Christians”<sup>55</sup> who submit their minds as well as their hearts and wills to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This goal cannot be achieved without explaining the relationship of various truths to each other and organizing them into one whole system.

## II. OBJECTIONS TO WARFIELD’S DEFINITION

Warfield explains his idea of Systematic Theology as science in clear and consistent terms. It is our task now to evaluate some elements of his definition. He himself was aware of potential objections against defining theology as a science. In a short article Warfield lists three main reasons why people were unwilling to recognize theology as a science: 1) a low conception of science, 2) a low view of theology, and 3) the fact that theology is a practical discipline with its end outside itself.

1. According to Warfield, the first objection against his definition is the result of *too low a conception of science*. “If, for example, we mean by ‘Science’ the study of phenomena, merely – then to be sure, theology is not a ‘science,’ just as philosophy is not a ‘science,’ because, to wit, it is something immensely more.”<sup>56</sup> As an example for this view, Warfield quotes William Knight who says, “Theology is not a science. If theology were a science, God would be a phenomenon.”<sup>57</sup> Theology, according to this objection, cannot be placed within

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 266.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 267.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 269.

<sup>56</sup> B. B. Warfield, “Theology a Science,” in Meeter (ed.), *Selected Shorter Writings II*, 207.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

the circle of those sciences that have their subject-matter the phenomena of the universe. Warfield disagrees. The fact that theology has a special subject-matter (God) does not disqualify it as a science. On the contrary, it elevates it above all sciences as the science that interprets and crowns all other disciplines. If theology studies God and his relation to the world, theology can give an adequate foundation for the other sciences. It also builds on the sciences, given that they study God's revelation in nature, also a source of knowledge (though admittedly an inadequate and insufficient source in itself) for theology.

We can appreciate Warfield's point, but I wish he dealt with the seriousness of the issue more thoroughly. In a sense even if science had a loftier task than simply to study the phenomena of the world, God is so majestic and so holy that to make him an object of scientific examination can be rather problematic. When Warfield made theology a science, he used the word "science" in a historical-cultural context that generally operated with Cartesian presuppositions. Even if Warfield did not separate the object from the subject in the way the Enlightenment has done, the word "science" would communicate a view that makes God an object and us the subject. The same way biologists examine bacteria under a microscope, and astronomers examine the stars in a telescope, the theologian examines God through revelation. This is Warfield's language.<sup>58</sup> Is there something in this language that should be troubling for believers in the holy God of the Bible? Karl Barth would certainly think so, and we have reasons to at least partially agree with him. In the biblical religion God is not one of his creation, he is different, he is Other. Maybe not "wholly Other" since he has communicable attributes beside his incommunicable attributes, but different enough to make us fear him and bow down before him, and let *him* examine us so we can be known by him. I am not sure Warfield's definition of theology as science is helpful, unless we make it clear that our understanding of science is different from the Cartesian concept. It was in the middle of the twentieth century that Michael Polanyi wrote a substantial critique of the separation of the object from the subject in the ruling Enlightenment critical tradition of the philosophy of science, and re-emphasized the unity of the knower and the known in the act of knowing. In his magnum opus *Personal Knowledge*<sup>59</sup> Polanyi redefined the nature and task of science in a more Christian, or at least post-Enlightenment (but not postmodern!), framework, and thus, in my opinion, made the word "science" more conducive for applying it to theology. But at the time when Warfield wrote, science was mainly understood (as many still do) in an Enlightenment framework, and so Warfield is potentially liable to the above charges.

David P. Smith insists, however, that "Warfield did not operate with a strict separation between objective and subjective aspects of epistemology

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<sup>58</sup> E.g. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," 247.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York, Harper & Row, 1958).

because the personal triune God was at the center of his understanding of knowledge.”<sup>60</sup> He quotes Warfield who says, “All science without God is mutilated science, and no account of a single branch of knowledge can ever be complete until it is pushed back to find its completion and ground in Him.”<sup>61</sup> In a footnote Smith comments, “To fail to see the emphasis that Warfield placed on the subjective element in epistemology is to miss virtually the whole substance of Warfield’s arguments and beliefs in his essay on systematic theology.”<sup>62</sup> “Thus the idea that Warfield ignored, was unaware of, and failed to account for humans interpreting sensory data through their presuppositions is false.”<sup>63</sup> Maybe. But to say that Warfield put a strong emphasis on the subject is not the same as saying that he did not separate it from the object. Frankly, Smith’s defense fails to convince me that Warfield had a critical enough view of the epistemology of the Enlightenment. Even if Warfield accepted a theological version of the maxim *Credo ut intelligam* (which he did),<sup>64</sup> his main battle was against those who denied the objectivity of dogma, and therefore his emphasis on theology *as science* underlines his pursuit to establish the objectivity of its subject-matter. His definition therefore leaves Warfield open to the charge that by calling theology a science he inadvertently reduced God into an object. The problem is not a low view of science, but a low view of theology. Or both.

2. The second objection that Warfield lists is the result not of a low view of science but *a low view of theology*. We have to see clearly that by a “low view of theology” he means a view that denies theology a scientific character. It is “low” from the point of view of science not the point of view of the glory and holiness of God. This low view of theology in relation to science gave rise to claims that theology and science somehow wage war against each other. If theology is not a science, then science can have independent claims that effectively put aside the teachings of the Scriptures. If, however, theology is accepted as a science, says Warfield, there cannot be an ultimate conflict between theology and science, just as there cannot be an ultimate conflict between biology and science or astronomy and science. This seems to be Warfield’s main concern. “As a young, precocious boy, growing up among the rocky hills of Kentucky, and instructed in the ‘Old School’ Presbyterian theology, Warfield learned not to separate scientific endeavors from theological beliefs.”<sup>65</sup> For him there is only one reality and only one sphere of knowledge, however diverse and complex that field is.

A low view of science and a low view of theology equally separate theology from other realms of knowledge, and in this way brings a dichotomy

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<sup>60</sup> Smith, 105.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 106. Smith refers to Warfield’s essay “The Right of Systematic Theology” that is found in Meeter (ed.), *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield II*, 219-79.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, 106.

<sup>64</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Right of Systematic Theology,” in Meeter, 273.

<sup>65</sup> Smith, 102.

into reality and into our perception of it. This dichotomy makes a systematic and coordinated understanding of the whole of reality (or our knowledge of it) impossible. It is this dichotomy that Francis Schaeffer vehemently fought against half a century later, and it is this dichotomy that Wolfhart Pannenberg challenged when he again placed the resurrection of Jesus into a history that is open to investigation. We must appreciate Warfield's attempt to maintain the unity of knowledge at an age when the church had to face the deathly blows of modern scientism and rationalist criticism. Had he lived then, he would have certainly rejected the escape routes of Barthianism and Existentialism. Warfield insisted that theology must not be exiled into a realm that is outside history and outside the possibility of scientific investigation. On the other hand, one wonders if the only way to maintain the unity of knowledge is to make theology a science. Warfield clearly opposed the Kantian notion that reason can only operate in the realm of the immanent. When he wrote against the anti-supernaturalist theology of Albert Ritschl, Warfield argued that religion *can* intrude into the region of metaphysics, and metaphysics *can* invade the region of pure religion.<sup>66</sup> His idea of science is not limited to the "natural" sphere of life. My concern is though that by calling theology a science one can easily reduce theology into the area of the known and the knowable, and lose the apophatic and mysterious elements of the knowledge of God. We might win the battle for the scientific status of theology, but what do we gain if in the meantime we lose the "fire of the burning bush" and the "gale which blows from Mamre to the eternal dwellings"?<sup>67</sup> Warfield certainly cannot be accused of denying the pneumatic aspect of Christian epistemology, but I am concerned that his definition might unintentionally put a strait-jacket on theology that it is not meant to wear. However, Warfield's answer to the next objection makes his approach significantly more attractive than what we would think about it at this point.

3. Warfield calls the third objection "more reasonable" than the previous two. "[A] difficulty is sometimes raised against recognizing theology as a science, on the ground that it is a practical discipline with its end outside itself."<sup>68</sup> Science is often thought to have its end purely in itself. It seeks to know in order to know, and it is indifferent about the result of its investigation. "Therefore, the theologian, who is not indifferent to the outcome of his work, but wishes to conduce to the eternal welfare of man, is no man of science; and theology, which has as its end not merely to make man wise but 'to make wise unto salvation,' is no science."<sup>69</sup> The objection can be raised from the other end, too: "the theologian, were he a man of science, would and must be careless as to the outcome of his

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<sup>66</sup> Warfield, "The Right of Systematic Theology," 246ff.

<sup>67</sup> Søren Kierkegaard uses this expression in his *Journals*, referring to his encounter with God's presence.

<sup>68</sup> Warfield, "Theology as Science," 208.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 209.

work; and theology, were it scientific, would have no concern with the practical value of truths with which it deals."<sup>70</sup>

Since Warfield considers this objection more reasonable than the first two, he spends more time answering it. First of all he question whether any man should cease to be a man when he gives himself to science. In other words, the above objection demonstrates a rather reductionist way of thinking about science. Then, there is a distinction between theology in general and Systematic Theology in particular, says Warfield. Theology includes Apologetical Theology, Exegetical Theology, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology. "The scientific character of 'Theology' culminates in 'Systematic Theology'; which is, therefore, by eminence *the* scientific theological discipline."<sup>71</sup> It is Systematic Theology that comes closest to the "ideal" of having its end in itself. "To 'Systematic Theology' is committed that part of common theological task which is expressed by the phrase 'to make wise'; while to 'Practical Theology' is committed that other part, which is expressed in the phrase 'unto salvation.'"<sup>72</sup> Thankfully, Warfield pulls Systematic Theology back from such a false ideal and further clarifies his position. Not even Systematic Theology exists by itself or for itself. "It is a member of an organism, and it exists for the organism of which it is a part and in which it plays its part for the benefit of the whole. And the action of the whole culminates in, and all the functioning of the parts press on toward, the vital effect made operative in 'Practical Theology.'"<sup>73</sup>

There is more to say, though. "A far more fruitful distinction encourages us... in the twofold meaning of the word 'knowledge.'"<sup>74</sup> There is a purely intellectual sense, which is shallower, and there is a deeper sense that "involves the whole man and all his activities."<sup>75</sup> To know God is more than to have an intellectual knowledge about him. And the purpose of theology cannot be simply to frame propositions for the logical intellect. Warfield compares the task of theology to that of Aesthetics and Ethics. "For Ethics there is requisite a moral nature and that not merely in possession, but in use; Aesthetics does not consist in a series of propositions about beauty, but in the active functioning of the sense of beauty."<sup>76</sup> The same is true of theology. "Theology does not exist when only the intellect is busied with the apprehension of logical propositions about God, but can come into existence only in beings that possess religious natures and through the actions of the religious faculty."<sup>77</sup> Theology produces a *vital* knowledge of God that engages the whole man, not simply his intellect. Those who accuse the theology of Warfield with lifelessness somehow have to come to terms with what

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 209-10.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 210.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

he says at this point. Warfield insists that theology is not completed as a science “until this practical end is subserved.”<sup>78</sup> In fact, it cannot even exist without this practical aim. “There is no ‘Theology’ that does not touch and move that religious nature by the movement of which alone may God be really known.”<sup>79</sup> Nothing is theology which falls short of making man wise *unto salvation*. There are theologians who study the Christian documents independently of their religious value. Warfield quotes approvingly from a certain French man, Varicher, who says, “Theology loses nothing by the recognition of the possibility of these sciences; it rather gains by not considering as theological certain works which today pretend to be such, but in their whole tendency and point of view have no right to that honor.”<sup>80</sup> “Nothing could be more true,” adds Warfield. And he is probably at his best when he dares to say so.

### III. FURTHER OBJECTIONS TO WARFIELD’S DEFINITION

I have to mention further objections to Warfield’s definition that he does not deal with in his writings, but which can effectively undermine his idea of Systematic Theology as a science.

1. The first objection has to do with Warfield’s *optimism about the religiosity of the human mind*. In order for theology to be a science it has to fulfill certain requirements. “For the very existence of science, three things are presupposed: (1) the reality of its subject-matter; (2) the capacity of the human mind to apprehend, receive into itself, and rationalize this subject-matter; and (3) some medium of communication by which the subject-matter is brought before the mind and presented to it for apprehension.”<sup>81</sup> It is the second of these presuppositions that can be problematic. Warfield emphasizes that the theological science needs an observer that is capable for the task. “The affirmation that theology is a science presupposes the affirmation that man has a religious nature, *i. e.*, a nature capable of understanding not only that God is, but also, to some extent, what He is; not only that He stands in relations with His creatures, but also what those relations are.”<sup>82</sup> The medium of revelation brings God and divine things before the mind of man that he “may perceive them, and in perceiving, understand them.”<sup>83</sup> But can the fallen mind perceive and understand natural revelation, not to mention special revelation? Can the human mind see the glory of God on the face of Christ without special divine illumination? Is it enough to bring the truth of God to the mind of men in order for them to perceive and understand it with their religious

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” 246.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 248.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

faculty? Warfield's scientific model gives the impression that it did not take into account the serious effects of the fall on the human mind.

This impression grows when Warfield places Apologetical Theology at the bottom (or entrance) of the whole theological building. "Apologetical Theology prepares the way for all theology by establishing its necessary presuppositions without which no theology is possible – the existence and essential nature of God, the religious nature of man which enables him to receive a revelation from God, the possibility of revelation and its actual realization in the Scriptures."<sup>84</sup> But how does Apologetical Theology establish these presuppositions for theology? Based on reason? Based on "the religious nature of man which enables him to receive a revelation from God"? Can unregenerate reason agree with, let alone establish the presuppositions of theology? Is not this too optimistic an idea about the capabilities of reason without God and in the state of rebellion? Smith vehemently rejects the charge that Warfield was indebted to Scottish Common Sense Realism,<sup>85</sup> the name of which philosophy implies a similar epistemological optimism, but why is it that so many scholars nevertheless come to this conclusion? "While some scholars have rejected most of Warfield's scholarship as unbiblical, others, who are largely sympathetic to his theology, still believe he was dependent on and capitulated in meaningful ways to a realist, evidentialist, and rationalist leaning in epistemology."<sup>86</sup> It is difficult indeed to resist such a conclusion.

And yet, Smith is convinced that these conclusions cannot be sustained based on what Warfield wrote. "Warfield unequivocally wrote that truth is supremely expressed in the person of the Lord Jesus, that propositions do not capture truth in its fullness, and that the Scriptures, which are truth, can only be rightly comprehended through a living, personal experience with them that changes one's life."<sup>87</sup> At many places Warfield does say such things. In a short essay titled "Authority, Intellect, Heart," Warfield emphasizes the need for religious experience in the task of theology, and argues for a mild form of "Hermeneutica Sacra" (though he does not use the expression). "No one but a religious man can be a true theologian."<sup>88</sup> "The natural man cannot receive the Spirit of God," says Warfield. "They [the revelations of the Scriptures] must first convert the soul before they are fully comprehended by the intellect. Only as they are lived are they understood. Hence the phrase, 'Believe that you may understand,' has its fullest validity."<sup>89</sup> Warfield becomes even more unambiguous about the fallen state of the mind and the need for the regeneration of the intellect

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 254.

<sup>85</sup> Smith, 97.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Smith lists Ahlstrom, Logan, Noll, Marsden, Reymond, Riddlebarger, Stewart, VanderStelt, and Van Til among those who came to this conclusion.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 100-1.

<sup>88</sup> B. B. Warfield, "Authority, Intellect, Heart," in Meeter (ed.), *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 668.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 671.

when he continues, "the truths concerning divine things may be so comprehended that they may unite with a true system of divine truth, they must be: first, revealed in an authoritative word; second, experienced in a holy heart; and third, formulated by a sanctified intellect. Only as these three unite, then, can we have a true theology."<sup>90</sup> Smith quotes from another essay, too, in which Warfield teaches the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit: "The redemption of Christ is therefore no more central to the Christian hope than the creative operations of the Holy Spirit upon the heart: and the supernatural redemption itself would remain a mere name outside of us and beyond our reach, were it not realized in the subjective life by an equally supernatural application."<sup>91</sup> Smith feels safe to conclude therefore that Warfield did emphasize the noetic affects of the fall. "Indeed," he says, "it was because Warfield did believe in the noetic affects of sin that he gave a large role to systematic theology in the Christian life and the preacher's task."<sup>92</sup> Warfield was after all a Calvinist!

One wonders though if his theological position and his scientific model of theology were consistently harmonized at every level. I am willing to join Smith in defending Warfield from the charge of a deficient view of the depth of sin, but I also wish he had given less ammunition to his opponents. Some of his formulations about the capacity of the human mind and the task of Apologetical Theology do seem to be too optimistic.

2. Which leads us to the second and last objection against Warfield's definition of theology, that he had *an outmoded optimism about the progress of science*. It is not clear whether Warfield shared some of the Cartesian presuppositions of science, though it is clear that he lived in a pre-Polanyian, critical climate, that objectivized the actual subject-matter of science and separated it from the subjective observer. Some of Warfield's sentences about the objective medium of revelation and the ability of the religious mind to perceive and understand it, seem to put him in the critical tradition. His theological position, however, obviously contradicts the critical position. There is legitimate disagreement at this point on what Warfield really believed about science. One can more easily demonstrate that Warfield's idea of the progress of science was pre-Khunanian. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*<sup>93</sup> Thomas Khun argued that science does not progress via a linear accumulation of new knowledge, but undergoes periodic revolutions, also called "paradigm shifts" (although he did not coin the phrase), in which the nature of scientific inquiry within a particular field is abruptly transformed. Warfield had a nineteenth-century view of science, which still postulates linear progress. Warfield's picture of the history of science (as well as theology) is that of the building of a cathedral. It is a process of

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Smith, 101.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).



continual growth and perfecting of previous achievements. The Khunian philosophy of science challenges this view, and emphasizes that progress happens through revolutions and paradigm-shifts. It is true that previous knowledge is not rejected by the new paradigm, but it is radically re-interpreted. Warfield's idea of Systematic Theology does not have space for such revolutions and paradigm-shifts. When the cathedral is "near perfection," it only needs a capstone, a revolution is unthinkable. This linear view of scientific progress partly explains Warfield's strong opposition to revisions of the Westminster standards.<sup>94</sup> Once we reached a near perfection in our doctrinal formulations, there is only small refinement remaining, but not revision. The role of Systematic Theology is to create unity and harmony among the existing theological paradigms within the Scriptures (Dominical, Johannine, Pauline, etc.), and the historical formulations of earlier generations. If Systematic Theology also had to go through paradigm-shifts, as opposed to gradual refinements, the cathedral would never be ready to welcome worshippers.

There is some wisdom in Warfield's conservatism, and maybe some foolishness in the haste of contemporary theological revolutionists. There is a pinch of arrogance in titles like *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*<sup>95</sup> or *The New Perspective on Paul*.<sup>96</sup> Certainly, it is always possible to look at a subject-matter with fresh eyes and say something refreshing about it to others. It is possible to go through a Copernican revolution in our minds. But is it likely that we are able to revise the whole of theological knowledge – its vocabulary, emphases, interrelations and goals – after two-thousand years of communal thinking on the same subjects? Warfield is right when he emphasizes that theology does not have new discoveries, like other branches of science, it has the same old Scriptures from which God taught the first generation of believers. Is it likely, therefore, that after two-thousand years of scholarship we would come to such a radically new understanding of these truths that we would have to revise everything in light of that? I do not think so. Maybe theology is *indeed* like building a cathedral, and is *unlike* the Khunian model of science. Maybe Warfield is right about theology even where he is wrong about science.

But maybe he is not. Maybe there *are* paradigm-shifts in theology, too, even if not as revolutionary and radical as in the (other?) sciences. Maybe we ought to re-think the language and structure that we use when we communicate truths to new generations. Why would new generations or people of other cultures be fascinated by our medieval cathedral? What if their taste is different, and from the same materials and under the same influence of grace they want to build a

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<sup>94</sup> See his numerous writings and essays against the revision of the Confession, most of them printed in *The Independent*, *The Presbyterian Banner*, *The Herald and Presbyter*, and *The Presbyterian Review* in 1889.

<sup>95</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1993).

<sup>96</sup> James Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005).

different kind of building? In a stunning book, Vincent Donovan, a Roman Catholic missionary, writes about his experience among the Masai tribe in Africa. When he first went among them, he took with him the “medieval cathedral” of Thomistic theology. But after going through a crisis in his own faith and experiencing a lack of meaningful communication and understanding between himself and the Masai, he started everything all over again from the very foundations. In *Christianity Rediscovered*<sup>97</sup> he tells us his breathtaking experiment to build a new house from the biblical materials, a house that is shaped by the culture and taste of those that received the gospel through him. It was nothing like a cathedral anymore, it was more like a Masai house. But it was the house of the same gospel.

## CONCLUSION

In light of what Warfield says about Systematic Theology as science, and in light of what others find objectionable in this definition, I would like to make a few short, concluding remarks. First, Warfield’s understanding of the nature of theology and the nature of science reflects the age in which he lived. His view of science about the linear progress of knowledge is optimistic, and so is his view of theology in relation to the religious nature of man. Second, there is some tension between the content of Warfield’s theology and the scientific framework into which he is trying to force that content. Those who criticize Warfield because of his scientific model of theology must also study his theological convictions before making a final verdict. And finally, I cannot help feeling uncomfortable about the word “science” applied to theology. I appreciate Warfield’s pursuit to keep the unity of knowledge and his emphasis on the seriousness of the theological discipline, but I am afraid the price that we would have to pay for this model would be too high.

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<sup>97</sup> Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Orbis Books, 2003).