

Theology's Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response

Available December 2014

\$30, 352 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-3906-3

Natural Theology and the Reformed Objection

If English-speaking philosophers of religion know one thing about Karl Barth, it is that he emphatically denounces natural theology. In theological circles as well, Barth's position on natural theology is considered to be entrenched and uncompromising, or "simply preposterous." Anthony Thiselton expresses the widely held view that Barth is "the most outspoken opponent of natural theology in modern times." On this basis, it is reasonable to suspect that we would find sharp differences between Plantinga and Barth. The critical task is to specify where precisely the differences lie and to assess their significance. Since natural theology is one strategy for bridging philosophy and theology, significant disagreement here could threaten broader conclusions about compatibility and complementarity between Barth's theology of revelation and Plantinga's epistemology of Christian belief.

Initial impressions are not all bad in this case. Barth and Plantinga share some measure of agreement about natural theology: both raise vocal objections to it, though Barth's objection certainly appears to be more categorical than is Plantinga's. Plantinga, we will see, remains open to a limited role for natural theology, which Barth resists. The task of penetrating the differences between Barth and Plantinga is made somewhat easier by Plantinga's own consideration of Barth's position. Barth's ban on natural theology is in fact the only aspect of Barth's theology that Plantinga gives detailed comments on in his published writings. Plantinga agrees with what he understands to be Barth's primary motivation but withdraws from Barth's "in toto" rejection. No doubt this blanket rejection is in mind when Plantinga later cites Barth as an "extreme example" of a theological objection to natural theology. Plantinga's treatment of Barth, however, does not engage with the full scope of Barth's concern and, while highly valuable, is for this reason only of limited use. One of our aims, therefore, will be to identify those aspects of Barth's position that Plantinga does not examine and evaluate their impact on the question.

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to pinpointing where Plantinga and Barth agree and disagree on the question of natural theology. We will begin with an exploration of the driving concerns that motivate Barth's "extreme" position and clarify just what was the *natürliche Theologie* he so spurned. We will then take a look at Plantinga's engagement with Barth and Plantinga's explanation of his own position. In conclusion, I will assess the significance of our findings and determine if and how we might need to revise our emerging unified proposal and what has been, up to this point, a positive assessment of the compatibility, complementarity and centrality of their thought.



PART 1: BARTH'S DRIVING CONCERNS AND THE NATURAL THEOLOGY HE REJECTS

Most of what we need in order to understand Barth's rejection of natural theology has already been unearthed in the first two chapters. What we will attempt here is an unpacking of the implications that Barth himself saw for the question of natural theology.

Rejecting the move from below. Barth's primary motivation for rejecting natural theology is no different from his primary concern about the relationship between philosophy and theology. Thomas F. Torrance captures it well when he writes: "what Barth objects to in natural theology is not its rational structure as such but its *independent* character, i.e. the autonomous rational structure which it develops on the ground of 'nature alone' in abstraction from the active self-disclosure of the living God." If it were reason, per se, that Barth was objecting to, then we might be able to understand him as a thoroughgoing Ritschlian – positing a chasm between nature and grace. Instead, for Barth, the fundamental problem with natural theology is its presumption of an independently accessible knowledge of God on the basis of an innate human capacity. We saw in chapter two that, when it comes to theological knowing, Barth rejects the general starting-point assumption and the accessibility requirement of Enlightenment modernism. In both cases we saw that Barth's underlying conviction is that the knowledge of God can be established not from below on the basis of human thought or capacity but only from above on the basis of divine self-revelation. So just as Barth, in rejecting philosophy's pretension to have access to an independent source of the knowledge of God, does not reject philosophy per se – the very realm in which theology must inevitably do its business – so also with human reason, he does not dismiss or reduce its importance and centrality. He is quite clear that the knowledge of God by faith in the grace of divine self-revelation is a communication of divine reason with human reason. "The encounter of God and man takes place primarily, pre-eminently and characteristically in this sphere of *ratio*." The problem with natural theology is not the importance assigned to human reason but its latent presumption that human reason could provide neutral and independent access to the knowledge of God apart from encounter with and transformation by God.

– Taken from chapter seven, "Theology and Reason"





Kevin Diller (PhD, University of St Andrews) is associate professor of philosophy and religion at Taylor University. He holds graduate degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary and Calvin Theological Seminary, and completed postdoctoral work at the University of Notre Dame where he was awarded the prestigious Frederick J. Crosson Fellowship from the Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion.

The Problem with Theology

What was the motivation behind writing *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma*?

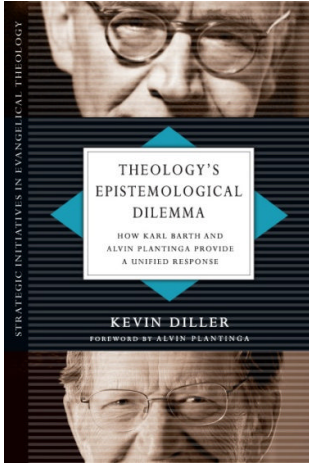
Kevin Diller: I've always been very interested in the intellectual respectability of Christian belief, and fascinated by the different ways believers defend their beliefs. Some believers belong to an anti-intellectual stream where Christian faith is intentionally separated from the life of the mind. Others belong to an intellectually triumphalist stream where it is thought that rational arguments can demonstrate the truth of Christian beliefs. And, there are many others who have no committed view and find the relationship between faith and reason confusing and uncomfortable. This book attempts to address this discomfort and confusion by offering a way to think about the relationship between faith and reason that is itself both faithful theologically and reasonable philosophically.

What sets *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma* apart from other academic texts?

Diller: The book begins with a dilemma for theology. The dilemma stems from the problem of how fallible and limited human beings may come to a knowledge of God by the gift of God—holding, as it were, a treasure in jars of clay. The dilemma is that, on the one hand, if we emphasize confidence in the gift, we tend to eliminate recognition of our own incapacities; on the other hand, if we emphasize humility and our own fallibility, we tend to eliminate the possibility of knowing God at all. How can the fallen and finite know the perfect and infinite?

The central thesis of the book is that the solution to this dilemma is provided in the thoughts of these two great thinkers who are often taken to be in conflict, Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga. Barth gives us a theology of revelation that strongly affirms the possibility of knowing God while fully embracing the inadequacy of the knower. He argues that the grounds and conditions for knowing God are given in the gift of relationship with God freely established by God with all humans in Jesus Christ. Plantinga gives us an epistemology of Christian belief, which he shows to be philosophically defensible and I show to be fully in agreement with Barth's solution to the dilemma.

In my view, there are several distinctive aspects of the book. I think the book is unique in how clearly it highlights the central epistemological problem for theology, and in that it provides a solution that is defended rationally but remains faithful to the Christian story of who God is and who we are as radically dependent creatures. Another distinctive is the conversation between Barth and Plantinga. Many academic readers, at least, will be intrigued by the notion that these towering and influential figures can be brought together in such a compatible and complementary way. Finally, the book is self-consciously an exercise in analytic theology. That does not make the book distinctive, but it is a part of a distinctive movement that is attempting to foster greater conversation between theology and analytic philosophy.



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“A Groundbreaking Work of Major Proportions”

“In this thorough and rigorously argued volume, Kevin Diller propounds an astonishing thesis. He contends that Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga are in fundamental convergence with regard to human knowledge of God. Conversant with a wide range of scholarship on both Barth and Plantinga, Diller admirably answers their critics, clarifies their ambiguities and limitations, and shows that their remaining differences are smaller than previously assumed. This is a groundbreaking work of major proportions that will need to be reckoned with by theologians and philosophers alike for years to come.”

—**George Hunsinger**, Princeton Theological Seminary

“In this groundbreaking study, Kevin Diller addresses a fundamental challenge for the Christian faith, namely, how one can affirm the knowability, universality and warrant of its theological claims while simultaneously recognizing the frailty and fallibility of those who hold them. Drawing on the complementary insights of Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga, whose approaches are so often mistakenly assumed to be in tension, Diller provides an original, rigorously argued and deeply convincing response to the epistemological grounding problem. This field-changing volume exemplifies analytic theology at its finest. More significantly it defines the way forward for any theology that seeks to be true to the trinitarian and incarnational core of the Christian gospel. This is not only inspirational but obligatory reading for academics, students and intellectually engaged Christians alike.”

—**Alan J. Torrance**, University of St Andrews

“Bridging the divide between an analytic philosophy like Plantinga’s and a Christologically-based account of theological knowledge like Barth’s will seem counterintuitive to many. But given the rancorous, often divisive character of so much theological debate these days, it is much needed. Beginning with the observation that neither Plantinga nor Barth is a ‘non-foundationalist’ – that both are, in fact, ‘theo-foundationalists’ who ground knowledge of God in a trinitarian conception of revelation – Diller goes on to argue that Barth’s theological epistemology, while not dependent upon any general theory, is at least compatible with Plantinga’s. The results are intriguing and give promise of opening a conversation between the followers of these two great Reformed thinkers.”

—**Bruce L. McCormack**, Princeton Theological Seminary

“In this book, Kevin Diller gives an account of Barth and Plantinga that shows a deep consonance between them and their respective attempts to address the epistemological troubles we face. This is an outstanding work that repays careful study. All those who care

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ENDORSEMENTS

about the future of Christian theology and philosophy, and the conversation between the two disciplines, ought to read it.”

– **Oliver Crisp**, Fuller Theological Seminary

“Kevin Diller’s study offers a courageous and provocative invitation to reconsider what he calls the ‘epistemological dilemma’ of Christian theology. . . . Blowing like a fresh wind through prejudices and complacencies that have haunted the relationship between philosophy and theology in modern times, Diller’s argument explores with philosophical precision and theological depth the possibilities of a Christian epistemology, where neither philosophy nor theology lose their intellectual integrity or Christian commitment. Reading this book is a liberating experience because it encourages its readers to engage theology philosophically and philosophy theologically, both critically and constructively, in the expectation that they both have much to gain from an exchange that is no longer tied to preconceived but often poorly grounded rules of engagement.”

– **Christoph Schwöbel**, University of Tübingen

“A remarkable study that probes in depth two seemingly unrelated thinkers and finds extraordinary resonances and commonalities. Learned, precise and utterly compelling, Diller’s work has huge implications for framing a theological epistemology in our time.”

– **Jeremy Begbie**, Duke University

“Kevin Diller argues persuasively for a very unexpected conclusion – that the theological-epistemological views of Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga are complementary rather than conflicting. Theologians and philosophers alike will profit from Diller’s clear, careful and insightful exposition of these two towering figures. Diller helps to put the relationship between contemporary theology and analytic philosophy in new perspective and represents an important further step in building bridges between the two disciplines.”

– **Michael Rea**, University of Notre Dame

“Many theologians who know Barth well know little about contemporary Christian philosophy in general and very little about Plantinga. Many Christian philosophers have only a superficial understanding of Barth’s theology. This book will be profoundly helpful to both groups.”

-- **C. Stephen Evans**, Baylor University