

## A Revisionist Response to Alan Padgett

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I think we are all looking for a responsible way to speak of science and religion in the same breath. My own attempts have been strongly influenced by my reading—many years ago now—of University of Chicago theologian David Tracy’s book, *Blessed Rage for Order*.<sup>1</sup> In that book Tracy moves beyond orthodox theology, liberal theology, neo-orthodox theology, and radical theology to what he calls a “revisionist model” of theology similar to Tillich’s method of correlation, but moving a step beyond it.<sup>2</sup> Tillich had affirmed the need for a correlation of the “questions” expressed in the modern contemporary situation with the “answers” provided by the Christian message. The correlation was between questions from one source and answers from the other. But Tracy held that Tillich’s method does not actually correlate: “it juxtaposes questions from the ‘situation’ with answers from the ‘message.’”<sup>3</sup>

Tracy suggested instead that theology’s task is to critically correlate “the principal questions and answers of each source.”<sup>4</sup> Or, in a more extended form, “the task of a Christian theology intrinsically involves a commitment to investigate critically both the Christian faith in its several expressions and contemporary experience in its several cultural expressions.”<sup>5</sup> It appears to me that, if we were to follow Tracy’s proposal, then science, as a form of contemporary experience would challenge the claims of the Christian faith and Christian faith would challenge the claims of science. A genuine, and mutually respectful, conversation between the two sources would ensue, and that is just what Tracy says should be the form of discourse in a modern pluralistic world such as our own. In this context the shape of Christian faith will emerge out of the critical interchange between the languages of the Christian faith tradition and the languages of contemporary experience.

Because Alan Padgett was gracious enough to send us an advance manuscript of his presentation I was able to study it and think about it before this morning. And as I began to read it I thought Padgett was going to present a revisionist model of the relationship between science and theology consistent with Tracy’s. Early on, he writes, “science and theology need to go beyond dialogue, to collegiality and mutuality. Science, theology, and the other disciplines can work together, to provide the Church with a Christian worldview that is religiously profound and scientifically sound.” Later on, however, his particular construal of Luther’s theology of the cross leads him to abandon this perspective in favor of one that radically subordinates science to theology: “Natural theology is, at best, a handmaiden to revealed theology.” He further argues, “the God

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<sup>1</sup> David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*. New York: Seabury 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Chapters 2-3, pp. 22-63.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

that is thus known [i.e. through nature and reason] is a God of awe-filled power and judgment, a God of wrath.”

I would like to focus this morning on one paragraph that appears to summarize Padgett’s position:

Too easily theologians are moving from nature and natural science to the doctrine of God, concluding that God must be a certain way because evolution is a certain way. . . . It is exactly here that I would caution theologians who draw upon the cross of Christ. First of all, a theologian of the cross will insist, with Luther, that true and saving knowledge of God comes to us in the Word of God, not in science, reason, and philosophy. Revealed theology is the proper foundation for a Christian doctrine of God, not natural theology. The God of evolution and genetics is but one of the masks of God, a god of awe-filled power and even beauty. But as Luther himself noted in his commentary on Jonah, the God known in natural theology does not appear to love us.

In a way, I appreciate this formulation. It is familiar to me. It represents what I think of as an orthodox perspective on the issue. But in light of Tracy’s revisionist model, I must examine this formulation critically.

Padgett, I think, is right to caution against a facile move from nature and natural science to the doctrine of God. It is, of course, too simple to conclude that “God must be a certain way because evolution is a certain way.” He is also, I think, right to follow Luther in speaking of the God of evolution and genetics as “one of the masks of God.” But I think our modern or post-modern consciousness of the social constructedness of all language might lead us to conclude that the Bible and the Christian faith tradition themselves also offer masks of God. Karen Armstrong’s book, *A History of God*,<sup>6</sup> could be understood as a history of the masks of God.

Moreover, when Padgett states that “the God known in natural theology does not appear to love us,” he fails, I think, to acknowledge the testimony of many non-Christians and Christians, who make a profound personal claim to find in nature gentleness, nurturance, and compassion and the experience of a loving, caring God. We need not think here only of Native American, feminist, and ecologically focused Christian spiritualities as examples. Luther himself, in the passage Padgett cites, writes, “This is as far as the natural light of reason sheds its rays—it regards God as kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent. And that is indeed a bright light.” But reason, he adds—on the basis of valid empirical reasoning, I think—, cannot know whether God will direct kindness, mercy, and benevolence to *us*, “because in adversity it [i.e. reason] so often experiences the opposite to be true.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps one could say that both nature and Scripture are capable of

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<sup>6</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. Knopf 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Luther’s “Lectures on Jonah,” WA 19:206-207; LW 19:54-55. The full text to which I am referring reads as follows: “. . . natural reason must concede that all that is good comes from God; for He who can save from every need and misfortune is also able to grant all that is good and that makes for happiness. That is as far as the natural light of reason sheds its rays—it regards God as kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent. And

communicating a loving God, but that, regardless of the source of one's experience of God, adversity seriously strains the trust humans place in God's goodness. Moreover, if the message about God to be gleaned from nature is ambiguous, it is well not to forget that it is altogether possible to derive from the Christian tradition itself an awesomely powerful and yet frighteningly unloving God, as some of Christianity's most vociferous advocates have done and still do today.

Early versions of Darwinian evolution focused on violent self-serving competition as the engine of evolution. Some of the most interesting recent developments in evolutionary theory, however, describe apparent discoveries of primordial versions of loving, caring, altruistic behavior throughout the animal species. Primatologist Franz de Waal's work, which he has reported in such books as *Peacemaking Among Primates*<sup>8</sup> and *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*,<sup>9</sup> would be a good example. And more on the general concept can be found in the popular books of Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal*,<sup>10</sup> and his new book, *NonZero: The Logic of Human Destiny*.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, it is possible to find a loving God in nature and a hateful God in the Bible, depending on what we attend to in each. That itself could provide the beginning for a collegial partnership and mutually respectful conversation between science and theology.

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that is indeed a bright light. However, it manifests two big defects: first, reason does admittedly believe that God is able and competent to help and to bestow; but reason does not know whether He is willing to do this also for us. That renders the position of reason unstable. Reason believes in God's might and is aware of it, but it is uncertain whether God is willing to employ this in our behalf, because in adversity it so often experiences the opposite to be true." The second "defect" noted by Luther is that natural reason "knows that there is a God, but it does not know who or which is the true God."

<sup>8</sup> Franz de Waal, *Peacemaking Among Primates*. Harvard 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Franz de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*. Harvard 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*. Vintage 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*. Vintage 2001.