

## IS IT POSSIBLE TO DO THEOLOGY WITHOUT PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS?

D.F.M. Strauss<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Particularly in connection with the doctrine of God the unavoidability of philosophical presuppositions becomes apparent. The uncritical theological practice to speak about a concept of God is in need of the epistemological distinction between *concept* and *idea*, which is philosophical in nature. If this foundational distinction is ignored one easily ends up with a theo-ontological duplication of the diversity within creation. Terms which are actually employed within the context of an idea (in the sense of exceeding the limits of concept formation) may then be misunderstood. Such (creational) terms are then lifted from their given creational context and in an "original" sense positioned with/in God (as "essential properties"). The (theo-ontological) circle is completed when these "properties" (for example the *infinity* of God) are then, in a *derivative* sense, brought back to the domain of creation from where it was "kidnapped" in the first place. The fact that concept formation always proceeds in terms of *universalia*, on the other hand implies that one can only talk about a concept of God if God is no longer *unique* (in the biblical sense that there is but one true God). Alongside many other "gods" God would then have to conform to a universal law for "being God". But since it is only characteristic of created entities that they are subject to the order which God as Creator has set for them, this ultimately entails that grasping God in a concept subjects God to a creational law. The distinction between concept and idea is also elucidated with reference to conceptual and idea-usages of the term constancy (inertia). All in all our argumentation fits within the context of a new account to address in a meaningful way (also in scientific theological parlance) the possibility to employ creational terms in talking about God while at the same time honoring God's transcendence.

### OPSOMMING

Veral met betrekking tot die Godsleer word die onvermydelikheid van wysgerige veronderstellinge duidelik. Die onkritiese teologiese gebruik om van 'n Godsbegrip te praat benodig in werklikheid die wysgerig-kennisteoretiese onderskeiding tussen *begrip* en *idee*. Wanneer hierdie funderende onderskeiding geïgnoreer word, beland ons maklik in 'n teo-ontologiese verdubbeling van die skeppingsverkeidenheid. Terme wat eintlik idee-matig (d.w.s. oor die grense van begripskennis heenwysend) gebruik word, word dan misverstaan, uit hul oorspronklike skeppingskonteks gelig en as "oorspronklik" by/in God (as "wesenseienskappe") geplaas. Die sirkel word

1 Prof. D.F.M. Strauss, Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe, Universiteit van die Vrystaat. Bloemfontein.

voltooi wanneer dergelike “eienskappe” (bv. die *oneindigheid* van God) ten slotte dan in *afgeleide* sin opnuut teruggebring word na die skeppingsdomein vanwaar dit in die eerste plek “geroof” is.

Andersyds impliseer die feit dat begripsvorming altyd geskied in terme van *universalia* dat daar slegs van ’n begrip van God sprake kan wees indien God nie meer *enig* (in die Bybelse sin van die Woord) is nie, maar inderdaad (saam met talle ander “gode”) aan ’n universele *orde vir* God-wees beantwoord. Slegs *skepsel* is onderworpe aan ’n orde wat God as Skepper daarvoor gestel het, wat derhalwe uiteindelik daarop neerkom dat die “god” wat in begrip gevat is in die skepping ingetrek is as *wetsonderdaan*.

Die begrip/idee onderskeiding word ook saaklik toegelig aan die hand van ’n begrips- en idee-gebruik van konstansie (inersie). Globaal staan dit binne die konteks van ’n nuwe verantwoording van die moontlikheid om sinvol (ook wetenskaplik-teologies) met behulp van *skeppingssterme* oor God te praat en juis daarmee erkenning te verleen aan die transendensie van God.

Spruyt quotes Land saying:

Philosophy at large can dispense with Universities, but Universities, that try to dispense with Philosophy will be found in the long run to tamper with the mainspring of their own constitution (1889:127).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Not only the etymology of the term *theology* but also the actual history of the discipline known under this name makes it plain that in some or other way the scholarly endeavours of this subject speak about “God”. Of course there is a rich speculative legacy within philosophy concerned with what philosophers rationally constructed God to be. Wilhelm Weischedel wrote extensively about this tradition in his work on the “God of the philosophers” (*Die Gott der Philosophen*). Surely the “God of the theologians” cannot be identified with the “God of the philosophers”. Someone like Heidegger even claims that theology is not the “science of God”, since it must rather be viewed as *reflection on faith*. For this reason theology, according to Heidegger, “avoid any sort of philosophical system” (Heidegger 1970:25, cf. p.18).

Pannenberg, by contrast, explicitly goes back to Thomas Aquinas in order to restore and maintain the idea that theology does deal with God:

In proclaiming the one God, Christianity appealed from the start to philosophy and to its criticism of the polytheistic beliefs of other peoples. The reference was first to the Stoic theories and later, above all,

to the doctrine of God found in Platonism. Such an appeal to the philosophical doctrine of God must not be interpreted only in an external sense as an accommodation to the spiritual climate of Hellenism. Instead, it reflects the condition for the possibility that non-Jews, without becoming Jews, might come to believe in the God of Israel as the new God of all humanity. The appeal to the philosophers' teachings concerning the one God was the condition for the emergence of a Gentile church at all. We must therefore conclude that the connection between Christian faith and Hellenistic thought in general — and the connection between the God of the Bible and the God of the philosophers in particular — does not represent a foreign infiltration into the original Christian message, but rather belongs to its very foundations (Pannenberg 1990:11-12).

Later on in this work he adds the following remark:

Christian theology, in contrast to Heidegger's construal of it, is essentially an inquiry [Wissenschaft] into God and his revelation. Everything else that occurs within theology can become a theme for the theologian only "in relation to God", as Thomas Aquinas put it: *sub ratione Dei*. Christian theology would lose not only its specific content but also, and most importantly, the consciousness of truth that is intrinsic to it, if it were to follow Heidegger's advice to stop speaking of God in the realm of thought (Pannenberg 1990:120).

Suppose we accept for the moment that theology cannot avoid entering into "God-talk" (to be distinguished from the "Divine discourse" discussed by Wolterstorff - 1998). Is it then unavoidable that theology ought to employ some or other *concept* of God (in the "realm of thought")? Most theologians will affirm this implication. Yet, exactly at this point inevitable philosophical presuppositions emerge because reflection on the nature of concept formation delves into the *epistemological* presuppositions of theology which are philosophical in nature. As we shall argue below, concept formation always entails an appeal to *universal* properties which cannot be divorced from *universal conditions*. But if God is the origin of all conditions and of being conditioned, can one then still claim that a concept of God is possible?<sup>2</sup>

## 2. THE TEMPTATION OF THEO-ONTOLOGY

It is amazing to see how easily one can assume a certain philosophical perspective without being aware of the fact that it is indeed philosophical in nature. But once this is done, with the best of pious intentions, God is subsequently portrayed in terms of this implicit philosophical scheme. In

2 Cf. Strauss (1991:23-43) where this issue is discussed at length.

doing this key features of creation are then “positioned” “within” God such that our experience of these properties is subsequently accounted for by deducing them from the elevated “essence” of God. This is in line with the traditional claim of theology, namely that it merely *listens* to the Bible — a “pure understanding” that should obediently be followed in scholarly (“scientific”) theological reflection about God. What about an attribute like infinity?

Although the Bible does not explicitly attribute *infinity* to God, the theological tradition deduces God’s infinity from his *omnipresence* and *eternity*. *Eternity* is alternatively understood in terms of two apparently opposing notions: an *endless period of time* or *timelessness*. These two notions, on the one hand, may be related to the so-called Platonic and Aristotelian traditions, but actually should be appreciated in close coherence with the two conceptions of infinity operative in the history of mathematics (and theology). What I have in mind is the opposition between the so-called *potential infinite* and the so-called *actual infinite*.

Reflecting for a moment upon the assumed property of *infinity* as applied to God we may be able to uncover a telling example of theo-ontological reasoning.

### 3. GOD’S INFINITY

In anticipation to what will be argued below, we start with a brief summary of what is at stake. When mention is made of God’s infinity in a theological context, the (theo-ontological) assumption is simply that infinity originally (eminently) belongs to God and that whenever we employ the notion of infinity in mathematics it is *derived* from the theological understanding of God’s infinity. (Since Nicolas of Cusa it is also customary to say that infinity in the sense of endlessness belongs to mathematics, but that the actual infinite is reserved for God only.)

Our argument will be that this theological legacy did not start by analysing the *structural* inter-connections between the fiduciary mode of speech (the “language of faith”) and the numerical (quantitative) aspect of reality, and consequently did not realise that infinity is a mathematical notion to begin with which only afterwards could be employed theologically. If this is not realised, a neat theo-ontological circle is followed: infinity is first *lifted* from its cosmic “place” by assuming that originally it belongs to God and once this shift is made infinity can only be (re-)introduced within the domain of number by taking it over from theology!

In order to illustrate this mode of thought we take the stance defended by Chase (1996) as an example. The historical analysis of the examples given by Chase seem to be meaningful for demonstrating the general point that Christian theology did have an impact upon the development of modern mathematics. However, by ignoring the *structural relationships* between theology and mathematics, certain questions could be raised about the overall perspective in terms of which the historical material is placed.

Perhaps the implicit scholastic definition of theology is responsible for the above mentioned shortcoming, namely that Chase does not explicitly consider the second option open to him: exploring next to the *genetic* perspective also a *structural* analysis of the relationship. On a *structural* level, Chase should at least give an account of the fundamental *concepts* (and *ideas*) used by mathematicians and theologians. This *philosophical* issue pertains to the phenomenon that different scientific disciplines frequently use scientific terms which are seemingly similar, but still differ in the sense that they are used within the context of diverse scientific universes of discourse.

For example, no one can deny that both mathematicians and theologians use *numerical* terms like the numerals “one”, “two” and “three”. The underlying philosophical issue would be: are these notions *originally* (i.e., in a structural-ontic sense) *numerical* notions which are *analogously* used within a different (faith) context when theologians say that there is but “one” God, or when they speak about God’s “tri-unity”?

A closer analysis of the diversity of modal aspects in reality - and the accompanying *modal terms* - would show that the basic concepts and ideas employed in theological parlance are fundamentally dependent upon the remarkable coherence between the certitudinal aspect of reality, central in the theological concern, and the different other aspects of reality which are, by means of *moments of similarity*, *analogically* reflected within the structure of the fiduciary aspect of reality.

Let us pursue the notion of number a bit further in this context. The awareness of *one*, another *one*, and so on (*indefinitely*), constitutes the most *basic* and most *primitive awareness* of *infinity* one can have. It is only when this *numerical* intuition is deepened by our *spatial* awareness of something (which, as a whole is) being given *at once*, that we are able to consider any *indefinitely proceeding sequence* (to use a phrase from intuitionistic mathematics) *as if* all its elements are given *simultaneously*, i.e., as a “completed totality”. We may designate these two forms of the infinite as the *successive infinite* and the *at once infinite*. Both these notions of infinity are originally located within the numerical aspect of reality and can only come to expression on the basis of the integral coherence between the numerical aspect and the spatial

aspect (amongst others which we ignore for the moment). It is therefore surprising to hear Chase asking the question: “Could infinities such as a completed totality be brought into mathematics without a Christian theological foundation?” (Chase 1996:209).

He proceeds by stating:

At the very least, some idea of God standing outside of our experience must have been necessary, since apart from God we have no experience of the infinite (Chase 1996:209).

Chase also mentions the following fact:

Some Scholastics in the middle Ages and Cantor in the nineteenth century believed in an actual mathematical infinity, based on God’s infinity (Chase 1996:209-210).

Since Chase did not investigate any structural relationship between mathematics and theology, his historical analysis precludes the option of acknowledging infinity (in both of its forms) as “mathematical” (i.e., numerical and numerically deepened) *analogies* operative within the theological universe of discourse. By doing this the implicit dualism pre-supposed in his argument would be reverted to its opposite. In stead of supposing that the notion of “infinities such as a completed totality” originally is a *theological* idea which is completely foreign and external to mathematics, one would then much rather acknowledge that *within* the structural nature and interrelationships between number and space we first of all encounter the notion of infinity — which secondarily could be reflected within the structure of the certitudinal aspect in an analogical way. By not tracing the notion of infinity back to its original “modal seat”, it can only serve as a notion brought “from the outside” into mathematics, i.e., as something “purely” theological which can only in the second place bear upon the field of investigation of mathematics. However, by realising the (deepened) numerical seat of the notion of infinity, one would rather start from the assumption that theologians could only use notions of infinity as *mathematical analogies* in their theological argumentation. A shortcoming, in this regard, is given in the fact that Chase does not enter into a discussion of the notion of infinity as it is traditionally employed in Christian theology, for then, at least, he should have paid attention to the fact that the Bible nowhere explicitly attributes *infinity* to God. Theologians traditionally extrapolate God’s infinity from his *omnipresence* and *eternity*.

If we proceed from a *structural-genetic* perspective as the basis of our historical analysis (something absent in Chase’s article), we would argue the point he wants to make as follows:

Theological reflection and speculation about the “infinity” of God indeed paved the way for and promoted the eventual mathematical development of a theory of transfinite numbers (Cantor), but in doing that theology simply digressed into quasi-mathematical considerations which, in the first place, refer to purely *mathematical* notions related to the inter-modal coherence between number and space.

Chase defends a kind of “negative theology”: he does not acknowledge the numerical and spatial descent of the “potential” and the “actual/completed” infinite, then argues that these terms are originally *theological* in nature and eventually send them back to the *domain* from which they were (implicitly) kidnapped in the first place — in the form of *theological notions* fruitful for the further development of modern mathematics!

The true intent of a theo-ontological approach is best understood when we go back to the position taken by Thomas Aquinas and contrast it with a modern theologian like Karl Barth.

#### 4. AQUINAS AND BARTH

Thomas Aquinas inherited the opposition of “essence” and “appearance” from the metaphysical Greek concept of substance. In his *Summa contra Gentiles* (I,34) and in his *Summa Theologica* (I,13,1) Thomas Aquinas explains that we can know God through His creatures because, in an eminent way, God bears all the perfections of things *within* Himself. We know God by means of these perfections as they flow from Him into creatures (*procedentibus in creaturas ab ipso* — S.Th. I,13,3).

We have to realize that the emphasis is upon what is supposed to “pre-exist” within the “essence” of God. What we consider *good* in creatures “pre-exist” in God, albeit in a *superior* and *alternative* way.<sup>3</sup>

Initially, under the influence of neo-Platonism and Augustine we find an inclination towards a negative theological designation of God in the writings of St. Thomas. Sometimes the Plotinian conviction, namely that we could only positively say what God is not, almost verbally recurs in his writings.<sup>4</sup>

The conviction that being is the *primum notum* (that what is *known first*) rests on the conception of an *analogy of being* (*analogia entis*) which entails that both God and creation are subsumed under the basic denominator of

3 Cum igitur dicitur: Deus est bonus; non est sensus: id, quod bonitatem dicimus in creaturis, praeexistit in Deo: et hoc quidem secundem modum altiorem — S.Th. I,13,2.

4 S.c.G.III,49; cp. S.Th.I,13,8; I,1,7 and especially I,13,1.

*being*. [According to St. Thomas *being* (*esse*) and *essence* (*essentia*) coincide in God — S.Th.I,3,4 and I,13,11.]

Although things by themselves are finite and caused, they exist in God in such a way that they are *nothing but* God.<sup>5</sup>

The ultimate epistemological shortcoming in the understanding of Thomas Aquinas is that he assumes a *universal condition* for the existence of God, i.e., he deems it possible to form a *concept* of God. With regard to entities, however, concepts always either relate to the *order for* the existence of a particular type of entities (in which case we form concepts of type-laws), or they relate to the (universal) orderliness of entities (the *being* an atom of an atom). This approach ultimately levels the difference between God and creature by subjecting God to the universal order for being a God. But then there are many instances of “gods” conforming to these universal conditions for being a god — in contradiction with the biblical account which unequivocally claims that there is but one God, that God is *unique*. Pannenberg saw this shortcoming in his own way where he writes:

The idea of God is destroyed when he is conceived as an application instance (even though it be the highest instance) of some general structure which in its generality is distinct from God and which is asserted as a predicate of God (1990:145).

Karl Barth distinguishes the oneness (unity) of God in the sense of *uniqueness* from the oneness of God in the sense of *simplicity* (*simplicitas*). The uniqueness of any creature, according to him, is only *relative* because it belongs to a *species* which merely is the “instantiation” of a *genus*. This is just a different way to articulate the nature of concept formation which is directed towards an understanding of universal type-laws and the universality (orderliness) of entities “instantiating” these type-laws. The uniqueness of God, on the other hand, Barth claims, in itself is absolutely unique in a way that cannot be grasped in any *concept* (Barth 1957:447). Clearly, Barth here aims at an important distinction needed in order to account for the way in human beings can meaningfully speak about God.

It is clear that Barth does recognise the cosmic “residence” of the intuition of *being unique* (*being distinct*), as it is employed by him. We may raise an

5 Cf. Kremer 1966:399:

Alles Seiende ist so in Gott, dass es in Gott nichts anderes als Gott ist. Die Dinge sind nicht so in Gott wie sie in sich selbst sind. In sich selbst gesehen sind sie nämlich verursacht und endlich, in Gott dagegen unendlich, weil sie in Gott zusammenfallen mit dem göttlichen Wesen... In sich selbst gesehen sind sie Vielheit, in Gott dagegen Einheit.



immanent-critical question: if it is possible to refer to creatures by using the property of *being unique* does this not entail that we have subsumed both God and creatures under the same “condition”, namely that of being unique?

The only way out of this impasse is to introduce a distinction with deep roots in the philosophical legacy of the West, namely that between *concept* and *idea* (cf. Strauss 1973). One side of this distinction was already explored by Plato in his *Dialogue Parmenides*, which actually provides the starting-point of *negative theology* (where it is only permitted to say what God is *not*), while the other side in a certain sense reached its apex in the thought of Immanuel Kant. According to him the acquisition of knowledge proceeds in three steps: it starts with the senses, proceeds from thence to understanding, and ends with reason, beyond which there is no higher faculty to be found in us for elaborating the matter of intuition and bringing it under the highest unity of thought (1787, B,355, cf. B,730).

Syllogistic inference implies that the conclusion is always subsumed under the condition of a universal rule (the major premise). By applying this rule of reason once more, the condition of the condition must therefore be sought (by means of a prosyllogism) whenever practicable. Thus, according to Kant, the principle peculiar to reason in general, in its logical employment, is: “to find for the conditioned knowledge obtained through the understanding the unconditioned whereby its unity is brought to completion” (B,364). The concepts of pure reason are called *transcendental ideas* (B,368). These ideas instruct us only in regard to a certain unattainable completeness, and so serve rather to limit the understanding than to extend it to new objects (B,620). The *unconditioned* is never to be met in experience, but only in the idea — whenever “*the conditioned is given, the entire sum of conditions, and consequently the absolutely unconditioned* (through which alone the conditioned has been possible) is also given” (B,436). This means that the transcendental ideas are simply *categories extended to the unconditioned* (B,436) (this applies only to those categories in which the synthesis constitutes a *series* of conditions subordinated to one another). To Kant, therefore, the transcendental ideas serve only for *ascending*, in the series of conditions, to the unconditioned (that is, to principles; cf. B,394).

No *constitutive* use of these ideas are allowed, because then we only arrive at pseudo-rational *dialectical* concepts (the source of which Kant called the *antinomies*) (cf. B,672). The three ideas of the *soul* (thinking nature), the *world* and *God* are all to be used in an *as if way*, i.e., *regulatively* (cf. B.710-714).

The “thing-in-itself” is not *merely* an *idea*. On the contrary, due to the fact that we cannot *know* the “thing-in-itself”, but nevertheless *think* it, a mode of conceptualisation should exist in which we can *think* (be it as some-

thing *unknowable*) the “thing-in-itself”. *This is Kant’s transcendental idea* (cf. Hartmann 1957:311). To put it differently: in order to *think* about that which transcends concept formation we still need a “conceptual form” by means of which we can think whatever transcends the *boundaries* of conceptual knowing.

Although the German term “Grenzbegriff” is normally captured with the English translational equivalent: *limiting concept*, this practice may be seriously misleading. The intention is not to emphasise what lies at *this* side of the limit, but to point at that which *transcends* the limit. Perhaps the best way to capture this intention is to circumscribe it as follows: ideas are those forms of thought through which we approximate that which transcends the limits of a conceptual grasp. Ideas then refer to *limit-transcending knowledge*.

In a certain sense the modal dimension of reality (i.e., the aspects of number, space, movement, the physical, the biotical, and so on) conditions *both* the employment of *concepts* and that of (*limit-transcending*) *ideas*. This follows from the fact that the different modalities always serve as *points of entry* to our experience of and reflection on created reality. Modal concepts are always formed in relation to universal features of the different modal aspects — for example the concept *natural number, set, dimension, cause and effect* (causality), and so on. Ultimately, the nuclear meaning of every distinguishable modality is *indefinable*, providing as such the *primitive terms* used for our concept-formation and definitions. In the final analysis, therefore, one can only comprehend them by employing terms which themselves are beyond the grip of concept-formation — evincing the *self-insufficiency of rational thought!*

But let us return for a moment to the twofold way in which one can employ modal (functional) terms. Our primitive arithmetical intuition of a *discrete multiplicity* underlies our awareness of the *being distinct* of different entities and therefore founds our knowledge of things in their *individuality* or *uniqueness*. Consequently, the limit-transcending concept (idea) of *uniqueness* (individuality) ultimately rests upon *numerical terms* in service of an approximating and referring mode of thought — transcending the limits of normal concept-formation. In passing we have to note that apparently Barth is unaware of the *speculative metaphysical background* of the notion of the *simplicitas* of God — a legacy dating back to the *simplicity metaphysics* of early Greek philosophy (compare Visagie 1982:8-9).

Consider also other *modal terms* used by the Bible within the context of referring to God in the said approximating and limiting manner of *idea-knowledge*. God is revealed as *omnipresent* (an idea-usage of a spatial term); God *acts* (an idea-usage of a physical term); God is *life* (an idea-usage of a

biological term); God is *omnipotent* (an idea-usage of a historical term); God is *love* (an idea-usage of an ethical term), and so on. Surely these idea-usages of (modal) terms find their counter-part in the familiar conceptual usages of such terms. In the latter case these terms are not employed to refer to something transcending the limits of the aspects in which they have their “modal seat”, since they merely capture whatever functions within the boundaries of a particular mode. Saying that there are 20 people present in a meeting employs the numerical property of *being twenty* in a *conceptual* sense. Saying that a body moves *uniformly* employs our kinematical intuition conceptually. Saying that a tree is *alive* does the same with respect to the way in which this kind of entity functions within the confines of the biotic mode of reality.

Paul Tillich uses a similar distinction in a different context. He places it within the framework of the distinction between *form* and *dynamics*. Nevertheless, it intends to account for the same difference we have in mind with our distinction between *concept* and *idea*. He argues that *dynamics* transcends a delimited form and, consequently, cannot be grasped in a *concept*. According to him we nevertheless discover an approximation of this dynamic element almost in all mythologies:

It underlies most mythologies and is indicated in the chaos, the *tobu-va-bobu*, the night, the emptiness, which precedes creation. It appears in metaphysical speculations as *Urgrund* (Böhme), will (Schopenhauer), will to power (Nietzsche), the unconscious (Hartmann, Freud), *élan vital* (Bergson), strife (Scheler, Jung). None of these concepts is to be taken *conceptually* (I am emphasising - DFMS). Each of them points symbolically to that which cannot be named (1964:198).

At this point it should be clear that the counter pole of our *concept-idea* distinction is provided by the *negative theological* denial that we can say anything *positive* about God. The latter position, however, simply cannot account for the straightforward *positive* biblical mode of speech about God.

## 5. THE POSITIVE BIBLICAL APPROACH

We may now return to the *necessity* and *inevitability* of a *theoretical* (philosophical) *view of reality* — not only for theology in general — but also for the way in which theology may account for the possibility to speak (scientifically) about God.

Given the role of this (mostly implicit) philosophical view of reality, it should not surprise us that theologians could come up with such opposite extremes when they speak of God theologically. For example, when Thomas

Aquinas refers to God as the *highest being (ipsum esse)*, his mode of speech reveals a *philosophical* view of reality differing radically from some prominent theological approaches of the 20th century — approaches which would prefer to refer to God as the *loving Father* who is *close* to us. Apparently complementing nuances easily develop into *mutually exclusive* perspectives — in which case, for example, either the power of God or the love of God is chosen, without accounting in any way for the coherence present between these two emphases.

The decisive point to be observed, however, is that there simply is no single scientific discourse dealing with God that is not completely in the grip of and determined by some particular philosophical view of reality (“paradigm”). The crucial question therefore is not whether such an underlying view of reality is operative in our discourse about God, but much rather whether or not this (mostly *concealed*) theoretical world-view is itself in the *grip* of the *central meaning* and *radical direction-giving motive-power* of the biblical message! In a slightly different context Van Huyssteen recently correctly emphasises the committed nature of rational thought in the sense that it is rooted in supra-theoretical convictions:

The high degree of personal involvement in theological theorizing not only reveals the relational character of our being in the world, but epistemologically implies the mediated and interpretative character of all religious commitment, which certainly is no irrational retreat to commitment, but on the contrary reveals the committed nature of all rational thought, and thus the fiduciary rootedness of all rationality (1997:44).

The point stressed here implies the following “hermeneutical circle”: the soundness of a theological call upon specific Bible texts, in the final analysis, is not determined by the pious habit to substantiate a theological argument with quotes from the Scripture, since the outcome of “*Bible-text-support*” could only be reliable when it is done in full obedience to the *integral Kingdom perspective* of the Bible itself. Whenever the central meaning of the Bible is distorted, the unity of God’s *good creation* is jeopardised by identifying the *directional antithesis* between *good* and *evil* with distinct terrains/domains within creation — the source of a dualistic legacy easily leading Christians to fight the wrong battles (such as *church* versus *state*, *theology* versus *philosophy*, *faith* versus *reason*, *soul* versus *body*, *calling* versus *occupation*, *direct service to God* versus *indirect service to God*).

Given the contemporary emphasis on the *eschaton* anyone mentioning the presupposition of creation entailed in the notion of the *eschaton* is questioned. Olthuis correctly remarks:

The current eschatological orientation in theology which tends to seek even the beginning in the end will need revision. The Bible begins with Genesis and Genesis begins with creation. The Scriptures see the Gospel as the link connecting creation and consummation. And this link between past and future is revealed as the Word which connects the end with the beginning, the consummation with the creation. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:12). A proper vision of the consummation requires a proper appreciation of the beginning. Without this understanding, the fulfillment lacks substantial content and tends to evaporate into pious words about hope. A non-robust view of creation emasculates the gospel, for it is the creation which is brought to fulfillment in Jesus Christ even as it began in him (quoted by Strauss 1998:75).

## 6. WHAT THEN ARE THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A BIBLICAL FOUNDED PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW OF REALITY/ CREATION?

The rich *diversity* within creation simultaneously evinces a *coherent unity*. This unity-in-the-diversity is not a *product* of scientific thinking. Much rather, every scientific distinction should seriously take the *given* creational diversity into consideration. By its very nature scientific thinking, as *deepened analysis*, should explain the structural *possibilities* and *limitations* of our human capacity to *know rationally*, without rationalistically limiting knowledge to *conceptual* knowledge.

An amazing return to a radical form of this rationalistic position of (Kant and) modernity is found in Van Huyssteen's identification of the *structure* of the universe with human *rationality* and *mathematics*: "What is astounding, however, is to what extent our world is truly rational, i.e., in conformity with human reason" (1998:68).

Only the universal *conditions for* and that which behaves in a law-conformative way (as *factually subjected* to (God's) law) could be *conceptualised*. Consequently, the only way to form a "concept of God" would amount to subjecting God to some "creational law-order" for "being-a-God", as we have argued above.

The epistemologically sensitive theologian would, at least at this point, be prepared to support our thesis that humankind is incapable of *comprehending* or *grasping* God *conceptually*. It stands to reason that a *pan(en)theist*, believing that everything is (*in*) God, would think differently about God than

someone accepting that God *transcends* His creation. Traditionally, this boils down to the question whether there is an *essential difference* (wezensverschil) between *God* and *creation*. Medieval speculation postulates God's *aseitas* — deduced from the Latin expression *a se esse* which means: *to exist in and of itself*. The *intention* is to honour God's *self-sufficiency*, i.e., that God, in his elevated *aseitas* cannot be grasped in any human concept. The *way* in which this intention is given shape, however, once again illuminates the *philosophical* indebtedness of theological reflection. From God's transcendent *aseitas* certain *attributes* are deduced, such as God's *eternity*, *omnipresence* and *infinity*. These attributes are denoted as *incommunicable*. They *should* therefore be distinguished from the *communicable* attributes, such as God's *love*, *justice*, *mercifulness*, etc.

That this distinction is found in the classical philosophical distinction between *essence* and *appearance* has been argued in Strauss (1991).

## 7. INERTIA AND GOD

Pannenberg remarks that when the assumption that movement inherently belongs to the nature of bodies was combined with the principle of inertia it was no longer necessary to induce the cooperation of God in order to explain natural processes (1993:31). Particularly in the light of the *contingency* of natural events Pannenberg questions the strict interpretation of inertia. According to him the principle of inertia entailed the emancipation of natural bodies from the creator God (1993:20). In spite of his own preference for contingency and historicity as a more encompassing framework in terms of which we have to understand nature, Pannenberg ultimately had to fall back onto the faithfulness and identity of God:

Yet there emerge regularities and persistent forms of created reality giving expression to the faithfulness and identity of God in affirming the world that God has created (1993:22).

It is not quite clear how he harmonises this “identity-”appeal with his conviction that in the course of time “new patterns of regularity” emerge:

Thus it also becomes understandable that new patterns of regularity emerging in the sequence of time constitute a field of application for a new set of natural laws such that “the laws governing matter in a higher level of organisation can never be entirely deduced from the properties of the lower levels (Pannenberg 1993:21; the last phrase is a quote from A.R. Peacocke).

On the basis of these considerations Pannenberg argues against the supposed eternity and atemporality of the laws of nature - but he never contemplates the key notion of *constancy* in this regard. Constancy indeed pertains to the core meaning of the phoronomic (or: kinematic) aspect of reality where it is embodied in the notion of a *uniform motion*. In fact, the law of inertia aims exactly at this: a body in a state of uniform motion will continue its movement except when some force impinges upon it.

Although Plato already accounted for the possibility of knowledge with an appeal to *constancy* (elevated to his metaphysical realm of ideas), it was Galileo (inertia) and Einstein (the velocity of light in a vacuum) who realized that it belongs to the core meaning of motion. Similar to all other aspects of created reality also the kinematic mode allows both for conceptual and idea-usages of kinematical terms. A first example is the idea of *identity*. Applied to existing entities the idea of their identity employs the intuition of constancy/persistence — it not merely refers to the kinematic aspect of an entity, but to the full many-sided reality of an entity.

The basic kinematical intuition of constancy can also be stretched beyond the confines of this aspect when it is used in an idea-context in order to refer to the identity of God — in which case its referring meaning not only transcends the boundaries of the aspect of movement, but in fact it also exceeds creation as such in pointing beyond it to God. Just think about the Old Testament account where God said to Moses: “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14). Clearly, this entails an idea-usage of the kinematical meaning of *constancy*, of *persistence*.

The theo-ontological tradition, of course, will simply turn this relationship upside down: in stead of acknowledging the original “cosmic seat” of the meaning of constancy within the kinematical aspect of reality, it will start with the idea-usage (sometimes twisted into the idea of God’s *immortality*) and then in turn attempts to explain endurance within created reality by deriving it from God’s “immortality”. This is exactly what Descartes did in a letter to Mersenne (April 15, 1630) where he argues that the foundation for the eternal validity of natural laws is found in the unchangeability of God (quoted by Pannenberg 1993:116).

## 8. TRANSCENDENCE APPROACHED FROM “WITHIN”

Thus far we have selected a number of examples illustrative of the way in which an understanding of the unity and diversity within creation — accounted for by philosophy — plays a role in theological parlance, in particular in connection with the difference between conceptual and idea usages of modal terms. This approach amply substantiated our answer posed in the title of this article: Is it possible to do theology without philosophical presuppositions?

A positive way to demonstrate our basic claim is to ask: how can we account for God's transcendence without becoming a victim of *negative theology* and without advocating the other extreme position which simply (theologically) *duplicates* the creational diversity by projecting it “into” the “essence” of God and then derive creaturely properties from God?

The constructive service to be rendered by a biblically founded Christian philosophy is to help theologians to understand that in order to speak of God we do not have access to terms which are not proceeding from and making an appeal to givens *within* creation. By using these (creational) terms, however, we exactly want to convey the conviction that God *transcends* all of creation. But how can we continue this claim when we are “doomed” to do this in a “creational way” by using “creational terms”?

Of course the situation is made more complicated when the creational location of terms employed in our speaking about God is not recognized. Brunner, for example, states: “The omnipresence of God is his elevation above space whereas his eternity and immutability constitute his elevation above time” (Brunner 1972:272). Brunner does not realise that he has to *use* spatial terms in order to assert that God is “above” space! Similarly, when we refer to God as *causa sui* we first have to realise that it is only within the *physical aspect* of reality that we discover the *primitive meaning* of *energy-operation*, *causing* certain *effects*.

It simply seems to be unavoidable that the difference between God and creation can only be explained while inevitably using certain *creational terms* — and we have accounted for this inevitability by introducing the (philosophical) epistemological distinction within knowledge, namely between *conceptual knowledge* and (the limits of concepts transcending) *idea-knowledge*.



## 9. CONCLUDING REMARK

Through all of this it also must be clear that just as much as a biblically founded Christian philosophy may benefit from a biblically founded Christian theology, the reverse is equally true!

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

BARTH, K

1957. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. II, ed. Bromiley and others, Edinburgh: Clark.

BLACK M

1979. More about metaphor. In: Ortony, A. (ed.): *Metaphor and thought*. New York.

BRUNNER E

1972. *Dogmatik I, Die Christliche Lehre von Gott* (first impression 1946). Zürich: Theologischer Verlag.

BURI F, LOCHMAN J M & OTT H

1974. *Dogmatik im Dialog, Theologie, Offenbarung, Gotteserkenntnis*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

CHASE G B

1996. How has Christian Theology furthered mathematics? In: *Facets of faith and science, Volume 2, The role of beliefs in mathematics and the natural sciences: an Augustinian perspective*. Edited by Jitse M. van der Meer Lanham: University Press of America, pp. 193-216.

EBELING G

1974. *Der theologische Begriff von Gott*. In: F. Buri, J. M. Lochman & H. Ott (eds.).  
1982. *Dogmatik des Christlichen Glaubens. I*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.

EYBERS I H, KÖNIG A & STOOP J A

1983. *Inleiding in die Teologie* (3rd revised and extended edition). Pretoria: N.G.K.B.

HART H

1984. *Understanding our world. An integral ontology*. Lanham: University Press of America.

HARTMANN N

1957. *Kleinere Schriften. II*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

HAWKING S W

1988. *A brief history of time*. London: Bantam.

**HEIDEGGER M**

1969. *Identity and difference*. New York: Harper & Row.

**KANT I**

1787. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. 1st print 1781 (references to 1781 and 1787 are given as: CPR A or B). Felix Meiner Edition, Hamburg 1956.

**KREMER K**

1996. *Die neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie und ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin*. Leiden: Bnel.

**KÖNIG A**

1978. *Teologie*. In: Eybers e. a.

**KRÜGER J S**

1987. Review. *Theologica Evangelica* 1:64-70.

**ORTONY A (ed.)**

1979. *Metaphor and thought*. New York.

**OTT H**

1974. *Der theologische Begriff von Gott*. In: F. Buri, J. M. Lochman & H. Ott (eds.).

**MOUTON J M & MARAIS H C**

1985. *Metodologie van die Geesteswetenskappe*. Pretoria: R.G.N.

**PANNENBERG W**

1990. *Metaphysics and the idea of God*. Translated by Philip Clayton. Grand Rapids: Michigan: Eerdmans.

1993. *Toward a theology of nature. Essays on science and faith*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press.

**SPIJKMAN G**

1983. *Christian Philosophy as Prolegomena to Reformed Dogmatics*. In: Wethmar e.a.

**SPRUYT C B**

1889. Die Geschichte der Philosophie in Holland in den letzten zehn Jahren. In: *Archiv für die Geschichte der Philosophie, Hermann Diels, Wilhelm Dilthey, Benno Erdmann un Eduard Zeller*. Hrsg. Ludwig Stein, Volume II, Druck & Verlag von Georg Reinen.

**STAFLEU M D**

1980. *Time and again, a systematic analysis of the foundations of physics*. Bloemfontein/Toronto: Wedge.

**STRAUSS, D F M**

1973. *Begrip en idee*. Assen: Van Gorcum.

1980. *Inleiding tot die kosmologie*. Bloemfontein: K. Sacum.

1987. Die Stegmüller-Sneed modifikasie van Kuhn: 'n Wetenskapsteoretiese analise. *Journal for Christian Scholarship* (3/4): 40-69.

Strauss Theology without philosophical presuppositions?

1988. Begripsvorming in die sistematiese teologie. *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap* (3/4):124-161.

1991. Hoe kan ons wetenskaplik oor God praat? *Journal for Christian Scholarship* 27:23-43.

1998. *Being human in God's world*. Bloemfontein.

SWANEPOEL J & BOTHA J

1986. *Koers* 51/2:209-244.

TILlich P

1964. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. I. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

VAN HUYSSTEEN J W V

1986. *Teologie as kritiese geloofsverantwoording*. RGN-Studies in Navorsingmetodologie. Pretoria: R.G.N.

1997. *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*. Grand Rapids.

1998. *Duet or Duel? Theology and science in a Postmodern world*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press.

VELTHUIZEN G C

1987. 'n Nuwe antwoord op 'n ou probleem. *HTS* 43/1 & 2:205-231.

VISAGIE P J

1982. Some basic concepts concerning the idea or origin in Reformational Philosophy and Theology. *Journal for Christian Scholarship*.

WETHMAR, E A (reds.)

1983. *'n Woord op sy tyd*. Pretoria: N.G.K.B.

*Keywords*

God

Infinitely

Concept

Idea

Theo-ontology

Inertia

Negative theology

*Trefwoorde*

God

Oneindig

Begrip

Idee

Teo-ontologie

Inersie

Negatiewe teologie