

Doubting theology: James M. Gustafson replies

by [James Gustafson](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

How do Christians understand their faith in light of insights gained from history, social science, natural science and other modes of inquiry? How, for example, do Christians understand the book of Genesis in light of scientific investigations into the origin of the universe and of the species? How do they understand theological references to sin in light of scientific accounts of genetically determined behavior? Such questions have been at the heart of modern theology and especially that sprawling tradition known as “liberal theology.”

In *An Examined Faith: The Grace of Self-Doubt (Fortress)*, published this year, James M. Gustafson considers the ways that secular modes of inquiry—and their results—have been absorbed, accommodated or rejected by theologians. The book reflects Gustafson’s concern, evident through his career as a theologian and ethicist, to engage people in other professions and thinkers in other disciplines. It also reveals his dissatisfaction with recent “postmodern” or “postliberal” efforts that seek—in his view—to avoid scientific, social-scientific or other constructions of reality.

In these pages [William C. Placher](#), [P. Travis Kroeker](#) and [S. Mark Heim](#) comment on Gustafson’s account, and Gustafson responds.

My book is neither an explication nor a defense of my theology and ethics, though its analyses reflect that. Let me state the major religious and intellectual concern of the book in my own terms.

The book works from a descriptive premise set forth in the first chapter: The same actions, events, texts and other phenomena that are addressed or accounted for by theological, ethical, moral and other religious discourses are also addressed by other disciplines. These points of overlap I call intersections. A familiar example: the New Testament is an intersection addressed by theological, historical and literary disciplines.

The primary analytical inquiry follows: What kind of traffic takes place in an intersection between religious discourse and other disciplines? Does the traffic meld into a smooth current flowing in one direction? Are there head-on collisions between the disciplines? Are they diverted to avoid meeting? What reasons are given for rejecting religious or theological significance to incoming secular traffic? Or for absorbing it so that religious discourse is radically altered? Or for finding ways to accommodate evidences and theories from it? Only recall how different biblical theologians relate to historical scholarship, from Bultmann and the Jesus Seminar to fundamentalists.

I chose to analyze examples from contemporary theology. I offer a simple typology of three ideal-constructs to interpret theologians and to make comparisons between them: rejection, absorption and accommodation.

I also state that interactions take place on four intertwining levels: as descriptions, as explanations, as evaluations and as bestowing meanings. This is the case both in secular knowledge and in theological responses to it. Do theologians describe and explain events differently from other scholars in disciplines? Do they evaluate their significance differently and bestow different meanings on them?

I do argue that theologians who tend toward rejection, and thus away from the need to amend religious discourse in light of secular knowledge, are most inadequate for Christian life and thought in contemporary culture. My critics focus mostly on the basis for that judgment. I chose not to use the Warfield lectures, on which the book is based, to defend or advance my theological-ethical program, and I continue to believe that the central concerns raised in *An Examined Faith* stand independent of my own constructive resolution of them.

I intended the lectures to consider matters which inhere in theology and other religious discourse, and in the life and work of the ministry and churches. Of course, traffic control of different disciplines in intersections is not unique to theology and religious discourse. But religious discourse is my primary concern. The concern is not only theoretical; it is also practical and exists in ecclesial life and activity.

The lectures had primarily a pedagogical purpose. My hope was that my typology would facilitate comparative analyses, and that others would think about their own answers to my questions. For this reason, I described what I see as “gains” and “losses” from literature illumined by each type, and by comparisons between the

authors. The intent was to stimulate the audience's own thinking, not to tell them what to think.

The book emphasizes that the intersections are “in us” and not just “out there” for arguments in scholarly literature. Indeed, the sequence of the chapters was deliberately chosen to highlight the “in us” dimensions. In the second chapter, I constructed a story by following a college student through various courses in which she is exposed to radically different descriptions, explanations, valuations and bestowals of meaning on the human. Different disciplines describe and explain human “nature” and activity differently. For example, courses in earth history or evolutionary biology see the human in radically different time-and-space contexts than courses in ethics and psychology. In a course in religious thought she notes the centrality of the biblical claim that the human is made in the image and likeness of God. Because she is a thoughtful student, she is perplexed. She cannot avoid what has been called “cognitive dissonance.”

The intensive experience of a college student is an explicit example of what is present in our own lives. We are daily exposed to different interpretations of ourselves and our actions, of political events and our social relations. We have ways, usually implicit, to live with the dissonance. The second chapter was an effort to make us see ourselves in this student's experience. For the student and ourselves, dissonance is a profound human experience, both individually and socially. While it is surely proper to analyze its causes in intellectual engagement “out there,” I was trying to issue an invitation to self-examination.

My critics do not seem to pay much, if any, attention to the “in us” or “in them” dimensions of the chief intellectual concern of the book. I did not expect them to say which biblical passages or elements of traditional theology they have scuttled, ignored or allegorized, but I am asking readers—theologians, clergy and other reflective Christians—to examine the dissonance that in fact takes place in everyday life. I am not proposing a theory about interactions. My ideal-constructs of rejection, absorption and accommodation, and my distinctions between description, explanation, valuation and bestowing meaning, are meant to help in comprehending and illumining what is taking place.

My audience is not only theologians, but also clergy and other thoughtful Christians. I reiterate: there is some direction of traffic already taking place, if only implicitly, in pastoral work, in preaching and in moral activities. Pastors whose counseling is

informed by psychology have a position. Christians who accept both a biblical interpretation of the human and a developmental account of the physical universe have directed traffic in some way. Or again, changes in the traditional condemnation of homosexuality are supported by secular sciences.

The third chapter analyzes all three “types” of theological literature, not just the “rejection” type. The point is to show how different theologians direct the traffic. My critics say nothing about my analysis of selections from books by Philip Hefner, Edward Farley and Karl Barth. Each of them self-consciously directs traffic where sciences and other secular knowledge intersect theology.

The unbelievably learned Barth is important because he shows where he is going relative to both secular and religious alternatives. He argues that scientific and other secular accounts do not know “real Man.” The real human is known only in Jesus. Sciences and other secular knowledge do give “symptoms” of the real human, but they do not alter his theology.

Hefner has long been a major figure in the intersection of theology and the sciences, particularly biology. His interpretation of the human is more deeply directed by the sciences than Farley’s. But Farley argues that theology must take relevant sciences into account to avoid the dualism (“the ghost of Mani”) that has always shadowed Christian thought.

I am left to wonder what my critics think about these alternatives and my analysis of them. My critics are not fundamentalists, and I suspect that their academic reasons for rejecting fundamentalism are similar to mine. That is, secular disciplines developed in the Enlightenment—both historical and literary criticism as well as the sciences—make the fundamentalist claim for biblical authority worthy of rejection. I cannot help thinking, then, that my critics not only accept my descriptive premise but have made an accommodation on a critical issue in Christianity.

William Placher asserts that I insist that the Bible has nothing to say about neurosciences and genetics. As sciences, it does not. It says a lot, however, about phenomena—for example, human nature and activity, about which the sciences also have a lot to say. My query about absorbing the universe into “the biblical view” is about its difficulty. Most things that are truly absorbed into something else change what they are absorbed into. Any nonfundamentalist has absorbed a particular part of the modern world, and consequently has a very different view of what the Bible

does and does not authorize.

Mark Heim mentions the “intelligent design” movement as an instance of openness to science by conservative Christians. Why is the enterprise deemed necessary? “Intelligent design” is an interesting accommodation. To what? To the fact that contemporary Christians are exposed to, and cannot deny the effect of, scientific interpretations of biblical narratives about the origin, development and ends of nature. “Intelligent design” incorporates an interpretation of “the universe” into a biblical perspective, but it does not absorb it. The biblical narrative is unaltered. The desired outcome is to show that the Bible, without losing its infallibility, is congruent with a “scientific” elucidation. The authority ascribed to Genesis remains unchallenged; its believability is supported by borrowing some “scientific” authority. Or it is claimed that the Genesis account cannot be disproved by the sciences.

Heim suggests that my work implies some kind of ahistorical “absolutist” stance, but I have always assumed a relational view of knowledge in which what is known is related to its social location. I realized that long before I grasped its implications and learned theories about it. As a boy, I observed that some of my friends were Catholic because they were Italians, Belgians or French-Canadians, and some were Protestant because they were Swedes like me. World War II experience in Burma and India was a powerful exposure to cultural variation. At Northwestern University I concentrated on sociology and anthropology, rather than philosophy, to learn how social and cultural factors shape ideas, persons, institutions and events. One of my two sociological doctoral examinations was in sociology of knowledge. Sociology of science examined the conditions necessary for it to develop and flourish, and exposed assumed scholarly neutrality. That field was somewhat similar to the modern “archaeology” of knowledge.

My book *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* was written to show that interpretations of the church by theologians masked aspects that a sociological interest unveiled. There is also a sociology of academic theology, as feminist and black theologians have made clear.

Because knowledge is socially located does not entail, however, that its construction is shaped only by that location. Assuming a critical distance from religious or scientific knowledge does not entail an ahistorical absolutism.

Two chapters, “The Importance of Contexts” and “Navigating the Intersections,” follow the analysis of theological writings, and both are important for the pedagogical purpose of the book. Particular theologies are shaped in part by their authors’ understanding of the context of Christian life and thought. The persuasiveness of “rejectionist” writings requires acceptance of their interpretation and evaluations of the “culture.” To be persuaded by Hefner requires that one assent to his conviction about the importance of the sciences.

The “navigation” chapter develops and uses the distinctions between description, explanation, valuation and bestowal of meaning. Examples are given to help readers analyze what specific arguments are about. Are they about differences in descriptions between secular and religious accounts? About differences in explanations? Etc. Answers intertwine. For example, how does a preferred explanation affect what is described?

My critics ignore these chapters. Is it because they do not perceive the pedagogical purpose of *An Examined Faith*, or do they discount their importance? The materials they bypass are there to evoke a self-awareness that readers might not have, and give some guidance for critical analysis.

Placher asks how one determines the truth or falsity of a general theory. But my writings are not about proving theories. Theories change (for example, plate tectonics as an explanation of “continental drift” was ridiculed by respectable geologists with whom I studied). Given my calling, I study and am informed by arguments about theories, but I use them heuristically, like ideal-types, to advance understanding of particular phenomena.

I am not interested in determining whether feminist theories are false or true; I am interested in feminist interpretations of things. What I see, my description, is enlarged or corrected; their explanations test those I had assumed were sufficient. Feminist writings have disclosive power because scholars have a particular interest.

Placher asks three important questions about theology which would set the agenda for an interesting symposium. Different answers to these and other questions would occur because of conflicting judgments about the appropriate context for theology. Although analytical articles could demonstrate the significance of the differences, arguments about how to address a context would have to be theological. “Postmodernists” and I have similarities in our interpretation of the culture; their

theology stresses a prophetic Christian stance against it; mine stresses responsible participation in it. Our differences are theological. (I must say that I do not understand on what grounds Placher asserts that I think that dialogue with postmodernism is a waste of time. If it is, I have wasted many weeks.)

All three authors state that the biblical narratives provide a distinctive way of thinking about our world. I agree, of course. The sermons that affect me deeply are examples. But so do Freudian, behaviorist, economic and other ways of thinking. A theological explication sometimes radically clashes with the news of the day. I heard a sermon on how all things are made new in Christ on a day that Israelis and Palestinians were killing each other in Bethlehem. Theological explanations of why the religious affirmation and the events of that Sunday do not ultimately contradict each other neither eradicate the radical dissonance nor solve my religious problem. Pragmatic fruitfulness is only one basis on which to justify any perspective.

Like Placher, Travis Kroeker focuses on the position from which my critical analysis of “rejectionist” tendencies is made. Both of them appear to believe that my work leaves almost nothing for theology and religious life. Kroeker puts me in company with Feuerbach and Nietzsche. I believe no theologian ought to ignore their arguments and aphorisms. The theology, ethics and religion of my book *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* may not please my critics, but it is not vacuous. Kroeker shows the kind of interpretation he does so creatively, but it does not answer the questions of *An Examined Faith*. I appreciatively read his coauthored book on Dostoevsky, and commend it.

Parts of Kroeker’s essay might be misleading. He says that I allude to original sin. It is Hefner who discusses it and I analyze his argument. Readers should not infer that the language of “two information systems” of genetics and culture found in Kroeker’s article is mine. Hefner quotes it from Donald Campbell. Hefner believes that theology ought not ignore secular interpretations of the same experiences that theology explains. Kroeker believes it can.

Heim is more open to my basic concerns than the other critics. He takes my inquiry seriously and approves of self-criticism in theology and other religious discourse. Our differences are clear, but to engage his thoughtful article would require at least as many words as he has written. I especially appreciate his irenic consideration of various theological and religious movements that “seek a faith that is worthy of doubt.”

I, however, am alarmed by what I see on the four “Christian” TV channels in our “market.” My wife and I watch a few minutes of various broadcasts almost every evening. The Christianity they promote is broad and deep in American life. A viewer writes that his computer was repaired immediately when he placed a signed prayer cloth on it. “Prophetic” preachers use the same texts to expound “evil” Islam that they used to interpret the evil empire of communism. To hear about “the rapture” makes me believe that those who joyfully anticipate the pending Second Coming really are “resident aliens.” Charitable theological and religious generosity, I hope, does not impede forthright criticism of these kinds of Christianity.

In both *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* and *An Examined Faith* I explicitly describe reefs that classical liberal theology hits. In both I quote Troeltsch’s acknowledgment that it could lead to the loss of the distinctive particularity of Christianity. However, the ideas, myths and practices of other religious traditions, the implications of historical relationalism for Christian life and thought, and the impingement of the sciences and other secular discourse on traditional Christian beliefs have to be faced by theologians, institutional religious leaders, pastors and others. The intersections are in young people preparing for confirmation, in college students, in church members and their friends and families, and in persons deliberating about church membership. Many Christians are most aware of cognitive dissonance in experiences of tragedy and despair.

The “agenda” of classic liberal theology is unavoidable; the “liberal” spirit which takes seriously critiques of received Christianity is essential for the well-being of its life; a critical analysis of how a theologian, a church or an individual is willy-nilly an intersection of Christian faith and “modernity” is important. I conscientiously risk a “liberal” outcome in Christian thought and practice, as do other theologians, pastors and church members, if only to avoid some of the equally dangerous reefs that alternatives hit.

My own deep religious and theological convictions are expressed in the final chapter, “The Almighty Has His Own Purposes.” In it I meditate on some current events in the world in the light of some important religious and theological claims. The title comes from Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. Political theologians go from theology to insightfully interpret events. I, like Lincoln, am compelled to go from tragic human affairs and events to theology. The resulting incongruities might be resolved “out there” in ideational terms. But they are not so easily resolved in the lives and thoughts of many conscientious Christians.

To end my book with Lincoln's affirmation that "the Almighty has his own purposes," and to assert again that "God will be God," is hardly what some people call liberal theology. Whether others agree with my views is less important than encouraging critical self-awareness in my readers.