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# Must Christian Philosophy Be Directly About Christ? A Reply to Richard Davis

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**Abstract:** In his reply to my paper Richard Davis argues against my claim that philosophical work on the project of natural theology can and should count as work on Christian philosophy. He then proposes that for a philosophical work to count as a work of Christian philosophy it should be directly about Christ. Davis' view would commit one to a rejection of a large body of work done by Christian philosophers since there is a large body of work on Christian philosophy that is not directly about Christ. In this reply, I raise some concerns that suggest that Davis' proposed conception of Christian philosophy is too narrow and there are good reasons to resist Davis' suggestion as to what counts as Christian philosophy.

## I. Natural Theology Grounded in Scripture

In my paper, "A Missed Opportunity: Reply to Moser"<sup>1</sup>, I argued that the project of natural theology can and should count as an exercise in Christian philosophy. In this reply, I add additional ways to think about the project of natural theology that can be more helpful in light of the concerns Davis raised in his paper, "What counts as Christian Philosophy: A Reply to Tedla Woldeyohannes."<sup>2</sup> I endorse Michael Sudduth's two conceptions of natural theology in his book, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology*.<sup>3</sup> These two conceptions are the "pre-dogmatic model" and the "dogmatic model." The pre-dogmatic model of natural theology can be understood as autonomous of special revelation and it is a philosophical preamble or prolegomena to revealed theology or the Christian faith. The pre-dogmatic model of natural theology

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=168>

<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=167>

<sup>3</sup> Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2009)

typically involves philosophical arguments for the existence and nature of God, also known as theistic arguments.

On the other hand, the “dogmatic model”, according to Sudduth, refers to a project of natural theology that is “situated within the theological framework of the Christian faith. It presupposes the content of scriptural revelation and the subjective condition of regeneration.”<sup>4</sup> Sudduth writes, “Reflective inquiry concerning natural revelation is systematically reliable only if it is dependent on scriptural revelation and carried out by regenerate reason.”<sup>5</sup> He adds, “By ‘systematically reliable’ I mean reliable with reference to the production of a systematic *doctrine* of God.”<sup>6</sup>

It is crucial to note how the project of natural theology, as understood in a pre-dogmatic model, receives a meta-level justification from Scripture. Sudduth, again, provides some helpful ways of thinking about the meta-level justificatory dependence of natural theology on Scripture.<sup>7</sup> First, Scripture provides *justification* or reason to engage in the project of natural theology. The idea is that Scripture gives us reasons that justify why Christians should engage in the project of natural theology. Sudduth writes,

The appeal to Scripture to *justify* the project of developing arguments for God’s existence is distinct from the *use* of Scripture to prove the existence or nature of God. In the latter case, Scripture would supply the actual premises of theistic arguments. In the former case, Scripture is being used to show that ‘there is a natural knowledge of God’ or ‘there is evidence for the existence and nature of God in the created order’, and consequently, that ‘developing theistic arguments is biblically justified.’<sup>8</sup>

The preceding quotation provides an answer to the question whether Christians are justified to engage in the project of natural theology. I take it that the justification for engaging in the project of natural theology applies to both models of natural theology. Understood as a philosophical preamble or a prolegomenon to the Biblical conception of God, the project of natural theology is a reflective formulation and unpacking of the natural knowledge of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 223. Hereafter, all page references will be to this book.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 152. For the rest of this section I extensively depend on Sudduth’s treatment of the issues under discussion.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Italics in the original.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 155-164.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 155

God on the basis of reason alone.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that though Scripture provides reasons for engaging in the project of natural theology “[t]his does not entail that Scripture provides the evidence *of* theistic arguments. So the justificatory dependence of natural theology on Scripture would be compatible with the natural character of the theistic arguments themselves.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, “If natural theology is the reflective development of natural knowledge [of God], then the biblical affirmation of natural knowledge of God provides a basis for the project of developing theistic arguments.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the project of developing theistic arguments is grounded in the Scripture though theistic arguments are purely rational philosophical formulations of the content of God’s revelation in creation.

Second, Scripture provides examples of effective *uses* of theistic arguments. The Apostle Paul’s use of theistic arguments in Acts 14 and 17 is a good example as to how Christians can use apologetics and philosophical arguments as a tool in evangelism. Apologetics can be viewed as an application of philosophical work on the natural knowledge of God. Sudduth remarks, “It is true that Paul does not in either case [in Acts 14 and 17] attempt to prove the existence of God. But this is not surprising since his audience did not deny the existence of God. The relevant point is that Paul uses natural arguments that were relevant given the presupposition of his audience.”<sup>12</sup> Scripture also informs us about unregenerate human beings that they “suppress truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). Romans 1:19 and 2:14-15 inform us that God has revealed himself in creation and unregenerate persons possess some (natural) knowledge of God as a Creator from the created order and in their conscience. Regarding the texts just cited Sudduth remarks that,

The purpose of such [theistic] arguments in the apologetic encounter is not so much to persuade the unbeliever of what she does not know but to bring to consciousness what she implicitly already knows. The

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<sup>9</sup>The premises of arguments of natural theology are the contents of general revelation or the created order. The conclusion of theistic arguments of natural theology is that there is a Creator who is responsible for the reality of creation. It is important to bear in mind that that is the goal of natural theology. It is not the goal of the project of natural theology to provide redemptive evidence for God as the Redeemer. For a more detailed development of this view, see my, “A Missed Opportunity: Reply to Moser” available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=168>.

<sup>10</sup> Sudduth, p. 156. Italics in the original.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.52

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

apologist does not attempt to help the unbeliever reach God by way of reason, but rather he attempts to bring clarity to how God has already reached the unbeliever in the unbeliever's own rational and moral constitution.<sup>13</sup>

As Sudduth suggests it is reasonably clear from the texts of the Scripture that non-believers possess knowledge of God as a Creator and what they need to know is that theistic arguments are only reflective formulations of what they already share with believers. This natural knowledge of God as Creator by no means is sufficient for redemption but redemptive knowledge of God does not require that non-believers neglect the value of natural knowledge of God, which they possess but deny, especially when such denial is expressed by atheists and agnostics. The natural knowledge of God is what believers and non-believers share in common and a philosophical work that unpacks and makes it explicit is valuable insofar as the value is clearly understood.<sup>14</sup>

Third, furthermore, Sudduth identifies a *substantive* dependence of natural theology on the Scripture, both negative and positive substantive dependence. First, Scripture can play as a negative constraint on natural theology. The sense of dependence of natural theology on Scripture can be understood as follows: the concept of God that emerges on a purely rational basis can go wrong but “reason controlled by the deliverances of Scripture can more consistently arrive at claims about God that are compatible with the biblical doctrine of God.”<sup>15</sup> Sudduth elaborates,

The relation of negative dependence between natural theology...and Scripture does not undermine the natural character of natural theology.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> To present evidence for God's reality while downplaying the fact that non-believers possess natural knowledge of God, which can be unpacked by way of theistic arguments, seems to amount to inviting non-believers to believe that the Creator is distinct from the Redeemer, which is unbiblical. Upon presenting theistic arguments for a Creator, a Christian invites a non-believer to seek and meet the Creator who is also the Redeemer but efficacious redemptive evidence is not a mere recognition that a Creator exists. Efficacious redemptive evidence is purposively provided by God to humans and it is only those who are willing to volitionally enter into a personal relationship with God who can receive such redemptive evidence. It is not the shortcoming of theistic arguments to fail to present redemptive evidence since that is not their purpose to begin with; rather, redemptive evidence is relational and hence volitional and it can only be provided by God for those who are willing to receive it.

<sup>15</sup> Sudduth, p. 158

First, the fact that theological propositions are subtracted from a system of natural theology on the grounds of biblical revelation would not alter the rational grounds for the conclusions that are left standing. To be sure, the overall structure of such a system of natural theology will be guided by an eliminative procedure that appeals to Scripture, but the individual positive argumentation will be based on reason. Secondly, even if Scripture shows us that a particular theological conclusion of human reasoning is false, reason could still identify where the reasoning went awry.<sup>16</sup>

One way of understanding the crucial issue the above quotation raises is by noting the kind of divine being Aristotelian or Platonic or Stoic, etc., natural theology delivers. The theological mistakes that result from Aristotelian or Platonic, etc., natural theology, without a corrective role of the Scripture, can be minimized or mitigated when natural theology is constrained by Scripture in the sense explained above. The key idea is that the concept of the Christian God, based on biblical revelation, can play a corrective role to the concept of “God” that is obtained only on the basis of reason alone. It is important to understand the main reason why such dependence of natural theology on Scripture is relevant: Recall that the project of natural theology, as a purely rational enterprise, is to formulate, unpack and articulate in an explicit manner what is implicit, i.e., the natural knowledge of God. Since there is more to the content of biblical revelation about the Christian God than the natural knowledge of God that humans possess, it is plausible and legitimate to allow biblical revelation to play a corrective role regarding what can be naturally known about God and the philosophical formulation of the natural knowledge of God.

Finally, natural theology can depend on Scripture in a positive way as follows: Suppose a Christian philosopher starts with a clear view of the biblical concept of God and proceeds to see to what extent this biblical concept of God is consistent with the conclusion of theistic arguments. Or as Sudduth writes, “one could begin natural theology with a clear concept of God derived from Scripture and seek from there to prove on rational grounds that such a being exists...” He adds, “This is one way in which the Christian construction of theistic arguments might presuppose the biblical view of God, while at the same time taking seriously the logical work of constructing cogent arguments

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

for the existence of such a being.”<sup>17</sup> Sudduth addresses a worry whether conceiving of the project of natural theology might be undermined if the preceding idea is at work as follows: “In any argument for the existence of S, the evidential connection between the premises and the conclusion is conceptually sensitive to what S is supposed to be. This logical relation is not undermined by the contingent fact that one actually begins with a description of God taken from Scripture.”<sup>18</sup> One could also work out a concept of God and see to what extent this concept of God produced by reason alone receives *confirmation* from the biblical view of God. If a Christian philosopher starts with the biblical view of God and still arrives, to some significant extent, on human reason alone, at a view of God similar to the one revealed in Scripture and also if theistic arguments produce some significant description of the biblical concept of God, then such a confluence on the concept of “God” should not be dismissed as a pure accident. Such a convergence of significantly similar concepts of “God”, from reason and revelation, would plausibly be understood as a confirmation that the natural knowledge of God can be formulated and articulated explicitly in theistic arguments. In the next section we turn to examine a claim that natural theology is part of a project of Christian philosophy.

## II. Natural Theology as a Project of Christian Philosophy

Richard Davis raised an interesting and formidable objection to my suggestion that the project of natural theology can count as Christian philosophy.<sup>19</sup> First of all, it is important to note that, as I take it, Davis is not against the project of natural theology *per se*. If I understand him correctly, he is against the suggestion that work on the project of natural theology can be an

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> “What Counts as Christian Philosophy: A Reply to Tedla Woldeyohannes” (<http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=167>). It is worth noting that I also call the project of natural theology, when practiced by a Christian, a project of “Christian-God-centered philosophy.” I introduced this way of describing the project of natural theology because a typical way of doing natural theology, when grounded in and justified by the Christian Scripture, as we saw in the last section, is about the Christian God. There is no reason to believe that when a Muslim practitioner of natural theology engages in the project of natural theology that she intends to prove that the Christian God exists. This way of conceiving of natural theology is based on my rejection of an unqualified conception of “generic theism”, which I call the standard conception of natural theology. See **Section II** of this paper for the reasons why I reject the standard conception of “generic theism.”

example of work on Christian philosophy since natural theology, as he claims, is not directly about Christ. Davis proposed an argument to make his point. He writes, “So suppose, after considerable philosophical effort, I succeed in establishing

(a) God has created the world.<sup>20</sup>

Then if I am also entitled to

(b) Jesus Christ is God.<sup>21</sup>

(where the ‘is’ in (b) is that of identity), I can neatly infer

(c) Jesus Christ has created the world.”<sup>22</sup>

Let us call the above argument Davis’ Argument, DA. Davis remarks that (c) is a proposition indisputably about Jesus Christ and he then goes on to say that the argument is sound but expresses his concern thus, “What I fail to see is how it shows that philosophical work on natural theology “should count as work on Christian-God-centered philosophy.” Davis expresses his

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<sup>20</sup> Though I do not pursue this strategy further as a response to Davis, it is worth pointing out the following: It is important to note that Premise (a) could mean either (1) God the Father has created the world, or (2) The Triune God has created the world. Now (1) and (2) are not identical propositions but Davis did not tell us which one of them he has in mind. I resist pursuing this strategy (see the following note as well) since pursuing such a strategy would change the focus of the project of natural theology to a discussion of natural theology from a perspective of Trinitarian theology which need not be the needed direction to go. Thanks to Bill Hasker for pressing me to leave this strategy as less desirable for a discussion on natural theology.

<sup>21</sup> It is also worth pointing out the following though I do not pursue this strategy further: Premise (b) is ambiguous between (1) Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Triune God, or (2) Jesus Christ is God [understood as Sabellianism has it, in which case, there is no Triune God, Jesus Christ alone is the only Divine Person]. I believe Davis is committed to (1), but then, his Premise (b) fails to tell us which reading is correct. Understood as (2), Davis’ Premise (b) would entail that the Trinitarian conception of the Christian God is false. Furthermore, if (2) is true, then the subject of Premise (a) would be “Jesus Christ” since according to Sabellianism there is only one God, one divine person and that is Jesus Christ. Given Sabellianism these two propositions are identical: “God has created the world”, and “Jesus has created the world.” The inference from (a) and (b) to (c) above would go through *only if* (b) is understood according to Sabellianism.

<sup>22</sup> Available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=167>, p.5



disagreement with me in the following two quotations. He elaborates DA in saying that,

...any philosophical work I've done to support (a) won't automatically carry over to (b); in fact, it won't carry over at all. For *that* sort of work—say, reflecting on contingency of things, fine-tuning, or the finitude of the past—isn't going to show that (b) is true. Here it is obvious, I believe, that you can't use natural theology *alone* to show that Jesus Christ is God. But (b) is supposed to be the mediating bridge between (a) and (c). Without it, we're just not in a position to conclude that philosophical work on natural theology is *ipso facto* Christian philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

Also, any philosophical work that is added to support (b), Davis argues, "...won't be inherited from philosophizing about (a)—a proposition whose content *in and of itself* doesn't include Christ. So if (b) does enjoy philosophical support, it will be independent of that enjoyed by (a). More than that, whatever my argument is for (b), it will have to contain at least one premise that is *directly about* Christ."<sup>24</sup>

I take Davis' objection or concern as follows, expressed as an argument; let's call it DO:

1. A philosophical work counts as a work of Christian philosophy only if it is directly about Christ.
2. Natural theology is not directly about Christ.

From (1) and (2) it follows that,

3. Natural theology does not count as a work of Christian philosophy.

I take it that the above formulation of DO is based on what Davis says about his argument in the above quotations. Later I will offer several responses to DO which is an elaboration of DA. In the meantime, I turn to challenge what I take to be an assumption that underwrites Davis' objection. It seems to me that Davis' objection against the view that natural theology can count as

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<sup>23</sup> Davis, "What Counts as Christian Philosophy", p. 5; emphasis in the original.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

work on Christian philosophy is motivated by his concern that work on *generic theism* does not qualify for work on Christian philosophy. If I understand Davis correctly, I think that his resistance to embrace natural theology as part of work on Christian philosophy is due to his conviction that natural theology is another name for generic theism since natural theology is not directly about Christ whereas Christian philosophy should be; neither is generic theism directly about Christ. But can this assumption survive careful scrutiny? I do not think so for the following several reasons.

First, it is worth noting that I call the project of natural theology a project of “Christian-God-centered philosophy.” I introduced this way of describing the project of natural theology on the grounds that a typical way of doing natural theology, when grounded in and justified by the Scripture, as we saw in the last section, is about the Christian God. It does not seem right to disqualify a philosophical work as Christian philosophy when the writing is not explicitly about Christ or about God as Triune. I reject the idea that for a Christian to engage in natural theology is to work on “generic theism.” Recall, for example, the dogmatic model of natural theology. I see no reason to believe that such a conception of natural theology can properly be considered a project of “generic theism.” It is important to note that the dogmatic model of natural theology is “situated within the theological framework of the Christian faith. It presupposes the content of scriptural revelation and the subjective condition of regeneration.”<sup>25</sup> Obviously this conception of natural theology is not about “generic them” since it excludes other theisms in virtue of its being situated in the theological framework of the Christian faith. I do not see any reason to shy away from calling such a work of natural theology an example of Christian philosophy when it is situated in the framework of the Christian faith.

Second, it is crucial to distinguish the project of natural theology as an exercise in Christian philosophy, as I conceive of it, from a commonly understood way of thinking about it as a project of “generic theism.”<sup>26</sup> I take it that there are two ways of understanding “generic theism”, one of which is consistent with what I take to be about “Christian-God-centered philosophy”, but the other is not. First, “generic theism”, which I take to be the standard view, refers to common conceptions of “God” understood in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Second, it can refer to divine attributes of God qua Creator

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<sup>25</sup> Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology*, p. 223. Hereafter, all page references will be to this book.

<sup>26</sup> Note Davis’s discussion of Yandell’s book, *Christianity and Philosophy*, Davis, p. 2-3.

understood in Christian theism.<sup>27</sup> I reject the first sense since the purpose of Christian philosophy or engaging in the project of natural theology *for a Christian philosopher* is not to prove the existence of God understood in Christianity, Judaism and Islam.<sup>28</sup> It is reasonable to think that a Christian philosopher who engages in the project of natural theology need not think that he or she is proving the existence of, for example, Allah. Why would he or she?

In this connection, Davis expresses a concern, i.e., engaging in a project of natural theology as a Christian vis-à-vis a Muslim would land us in a “Protagorean perspectivalism, where I am the measure of whether a given bit of natural theology is Christian philosophy or not.”<sup>29</sup> I do not see why this has to be the case. First, as I argued above, when a Christian engages in natural theology, it is not the case that a Christian needs to think that he or she *alone* decides what counts as Christian philosophy when there is biblical justification for engaging in natural theology. The data in the Bible is *objective* despite the fact that people can and do interpret the data differently. Second, if a Muslim philosopher presents justification from the Koran for engaging in theistic proofs for the existence of Allah, what emerges need not be “Protagorean perspectivalism.” These respective justifications why a Christian or a Muslim engages in theistic arguments are constrained by what the respective scriptures teach about theistic proofs. For example, basic Christian doctrines are not up for grabs when a Christian theologian calls such a work a work of Christian theology; likewise, what the Bible teaches about the project of natural theology need not be up for grabs. Hence the “Protagorean perspectivalism” worry is unjustified.

Third, a Christian philosopher who engages in the project of natural theology, at least, would think and believe that he or she is proving God qua

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<sup>27</sup> The fact that philosophers refer to Abrahamic theisms as “generic theism” is a *contingent* matter and it does not follow from that that Christian theism with its conception of God as Triune must be identified with this notion of “generic theism” when this notion applies to all of Abrahamic theisms. It is not uncommon for a Christian practitioner of natural theology to build on what theistic proofs can deliver to go ahead and make a case that the God proved by theistic arguments is the God who is also the Redeemer. But for a Christian the Redeemer, who is also the Creator, is not Allah but the God of the Bible. See the Winter 2013 issue of *Philosophia Christi* on the project of ramified natural theology.

<sup>28</sup> Davis’ remark that the Kalam cosmological argument when employed by al-Ghazali could be about proving the existence of Allah but when Bill Craig uses it, it could be about Christ fails to distinguish the two senses of “generic theism” I introduced above. Furthermore, when *Kalam* argument is used by Craig it is not directly about Christ *per se*. It is rather about God as Christians understand “God.”

<sup>29</sup> Davis, p. 4

Creator, God understood in Christianity in the sense that God possesses such and such divine attributes that are identical to the divine attributes of God *qua* Creator as revealed in the Bible. This conception of “God” need not include descriptions of the Persons in the Godhead since that is not the focus of general revelation which is the focus of natural theology; to explicitly address the Persons in the Godhead is the domain of special revelation. Special revelation is the source of knowledge of God as Triune which goes beyond knowledge of God *qua* Creator which can be achieved by human reason alone consistent with what Rom. 1: 19-20 teaches.

Fourth, it is important to note that when atheists and skeptics ask for evidence for God’s existence the appropriate evidence is evidence for God *qua* Creator. It is important to note that that if God *qua* Creator exists, then atheism is false. That is, the existence of God *qua* Creator is sufficient to prove the falsity of atheism. Typically, atheism is not the denial of specifically the Triune God of Christianity because atheism is not necessarily confined to the denial of one or the other of Abrahamic theisms; rather, it is the denial of the existence of *a* divine, transcendent being that is consistent with the denial of God *qua* Creator. A Christian philosopher is concerned with an argument for God’s existence when God is a transcendent Creator distinct from any created reality. Typically, that is what atheism denies.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, if an atheist demonstrates that the “God” of “generic theism”, as the standard view has it, does not exist, it does not follow that the God of Christianity does not exist. Experiential, non-propositional evidence for the God of Christianity is distinct from the propositional evidence familiar about the “God” of generic theism.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is crucial to distinguish the “God” of generic theism from the Triune God of Christianity.

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<sup>30</sup> If God *qua* Creator does not exist, why talk about God *qua* Redeemer? If God *qua* Creator does not exist, then God *qua* Redeemer does not exist either since God the Creator is identical to God the Redeemer, given Christianity, but what is considered a sufficient evidence for the latter is distinct from what is a sufficient evidence for the former. According to Christianity, God *qua* Redeemer, the Triune God, reaches out to humans for a redemptive purpose, and this redemptive purpose is carried out by the three Persons in the Godhead. But each Person in the Godhead shares the divine attributes *in one and the same manner*, hence my suggestion that God *qua* Creator is *identical* to God *qua* Redeemer. The three Persons, *qua* persons, are not numerically identical but they are identical, *qua* God, in the sense that they share the same divine attributes. Since this is not a treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity I don’t need to say more about God *qua* Creator vis-à-vis God *qua* Redeemer.

<sup>31</sup> On the distinctive kind of evidence for the God of Christianity see Paul K. Moser’s books, *The Elusive God* (CUP, 2008) and *Evidence for God* (CUP, 2010).

The preceding four reasons support my suggestion that a Christian philosopher who engages in the project of natural theology is concerned with the project of “Christian-God-centered philosophy” as opposed to mere “generic theism.” The content of the latter is identical to what is commonly understood as “generic theism” in the sense that such a project is an exercise in developing arguments for the God of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. I rejected this latter notion of “generic theism” and I take the preceding reasons as plausible grounds for my rejection of this unqualified notion of “generic theism” when a Christian philosopher pursues the project of natural theology. In the next section we examine Davis’ claim that a Christian philosophy must be directly about Christ.

### III. Must Christian Philosophy be Directly about Christ?

Now consider my reconstruction of Davis’ argument, which I called DO for Davis’ objection. Recall the argument:

1. A philosophical work counts as a work of Christian philosophy only if it is directly about Christ.
2. Natural theology is not directly about Christ.

From (1) and (2) it follows that,

3. Natural theology does not count as a work of Christian philosophy.

I take it that Davis must be committed to the above argument. Recall that Davis says “...whatever my argument is for (b) [“Jesus Christ is God”] it will have to contain at least one premise that is *directly about* Christ.” For a work to count as Christian philosophy it is clear that Davis thinks that it must be directly about Christ. That is what (1) captures. It is also clear that Davis thinks natural theology is not an example of Christian philosophy, i.e., that is what (2) captures.<sup>32</sup> Now we want to see whether this argument is sound; it appears valid. But is this argument sound? I don’t think so. I reject Premise (1) for the

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<sup>32</sup> Davis writes, “And it is *that*—and *not* my work on natural theology—that actually drives the inference, and justifies me in saying that I’m doing Christian philosophy in doing natural theology. Natural theology is the impotent, silent partner in this logical transaction.” P. 5

following several reasons. At any rate, what does it mean for a philosophical work to be directly about Jesus Christ? Would a philosophical work fail to be an example of Christian philosophy if it does not *mention* Jesus Christ or it is not directly about Jesus Christ? I think a philosophical work can count as Christian philosophy even if it is not directly about Christ.

First, I think Davis misconstrues the goal and scope of natural theology. As traditionally understood, the goal of natural theology is not to establish that Jesus Christ is God. Recall Davis's elaboration of DA when he remarks that "Here it is obvious, I believe, that you can't use natural theology *alone* to show that Jesus Christ is God."<sup>33</sup> That is correct but what follows from this? That the project of natural theology must be directly about Christ? Not necessarily. It does not seem right to constrain the goal and scope of a philosophical project by requiring that it must mention Christ in order for such a work to count as a work of Christian philosophy. In a personal communication, Alvin Plantinga reflects on Davis' way of characterizing Christian philosophy as follows:

Rich Davis seems to take it that a chunk of philosophy isn't \*Christian\* philosophy unless it mentions Christ, or maybe doctrines specific to Christianity, such as incarnation, atonement, trinity. I'm not sure that's the way to think about it. For example, I'd take the enterprise of trying to figure out how to think of natural laws from a Christian perspective as part of Christian philosophy, even if it doesn't mention specifically Christian doctrines. The same for epistemology, causation, human

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<sup>33</sup> It seems that Davis is committed to a view that natural theology *plus something else* (which he did not spell out) can show that Jesus Christ is God. Presumably what Davis has in mind could well be that theistic arguments plus historical arguments for the resurrection of Christ could show that Jesus Christ is God. I do not know. Even so, Davis could say that the part that shows "Jesus Christ is God" is not contained in what natural theology delivers but it is contained in the historical argument for the resurrection of Christ, which is, of course, directly about Christ. If this is the view Davis holds, then it is unclear what role natural theology plays in a view like this. This view commits Davis to the claim that natural theology plus an argument for the resurrection of Christ could show that *Jesus Christ is God* but why use natural theology since, according to Davis, it has nothing to do directly about Jesus Christ's being God at all? If natural theology is *indirectly* about Christ, which is my view since I take it that natural theology is about the Christian-God-centered philosophy, our disagreement would disappear and Davis' main objection fails once again. Probably Davis holds a view that natural theology delivers a generic view of God and the addition of arguments for the resurrection of Christ is meant to distinguish Christianity from the other Abrahamic theisms. But this view faces problems I raised in **Section II** above. But my view of natural theology as a project of Christian-God-centered philosophy does not face the same objections leveled against Davis' view, as I take it, about generic theism.

freedom, divine action in the world, mind/body questions, the plusses and minuses of divine command theory, the nature of political authority, the nature of abstract objects, and so on.

Furthermore, one would wonder if my suggestion to include natural theology as part of Christian philosophy is “overly permissive” without worrying Davis’ conception of Christian philosophy is not overly restrictive.<sup>34</sup>

Second, some analogy can be helpful here. Consider a work of Christian theology mostly on the Old Testament. Suppose that such a work is done by a Christian theologian but the work does not directly mention Jesus Christ or it is not directly about Jesus Christ. It might have something to say indirectly about Jesus Christ. If we follow Davis’ construal of Christian philosophy, such a work on Old Testament theology cannot be a work of Christian theology. But this reasoning does not seem to be right. Also, think of a philosophical work on the role of the Holy Spirit produced by a Christian philosopher. Such a work can develop the role of the Holy Spirit in coming to believe in God or to know God as part of Christian epistemology. It is not implausible to think that such a work can be *more directly about the Holy Spirit* than it is about Jesus Christ. If we follow Davis’ construal of Christian philosophy, such a work on the Holy Spirit cannot be a work of Christian philosophy when the work is on Christian epistemology!<sup>35</sup> Following Davis’ construal of Christian philosophy one would wonder, for example, whether Plantinga’s book, *Warranted Christian Belief*<sup>36</sup>, is a work of Christian philosophy. Paul K. Moser, in his review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, writes, “Much of the book is both true and warranted, and profoundly *Christian* as well.”<sup>37</sup> It does not seem right to think that only if

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<sup>34</sup> Note that Davis worries about my conception of Christian philosophy as “overly permissive,” see, Davis, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Bill Hasker, in personal communication, raised the following concern: “Epistemology which features the Holy Spirit presupposes the Trinity, and Davis might well reply that, in the NT, the Spirit is very much the spirit of Jesus Christ, and this would need to be mentioned in such a work.” It seems that this is a legitimate concern. But now one wonders whether just directly mentioning Christ in a philosophical work would be necessary or even sufficient for the work to be a work of Christian philosophy. Obviously, an atheist who raises an objection against the resurrection of Christ would very well mention Christ in her work but it does not seem right to consider such a work as a work of Christian philosophy. It seems to me that Davis needs to say more about what it means for a philosophical work to be *directly about Christ* for such a work to count as a work of Christian philosophy.

<sup>36</sup> (Oxford University Press, 2000), italics added.

<sup>37</sup> In *Philosophia Christi*, No. 2, 2001, p. 369

Christ is mentioned in a work like *Warranted Christian Belief* that such a work is an example of Christian philosophy. There seems to be much more to a work of Christian philosophy than directly mentioning Christ for the work to count as Christian. I suggest that we should resist Davis' construal of what counts as Christian philosophy. Note that, having said the above, I am not suggesting by any means that Christian philosophy should not focus on Christ and Christ's pre-eminence in Christian life and Christian scholarship. Far from it! What I am resisting is a claim that fails to take into account a broader way of conceiving of Christian philosophy. A philosophical work that is done to advance the Kingdom of God, when "God" is understood as the Christian God, is properly a work of Christian philosophy, or so I think. Therefore, there is no reason to exclude the project of natural theology from Christian philosophy when such a project is properly pursued.<sup>38</sup> The fact that the Christian Scripture justifies the project of natural theology is sufficient for its being part of Christian philosophy.

Third, it is important to limit the goal of the project of natural theology to a philosophical prolegomenon to Christian theology or Christian faith. Understood this way, there is no need to worry about the project of natural theology in the sense that it must be *directly* about Christ when it need not be. If and when successful, natural theology as a formulation and an explicit articulation of the natural knowledge of God can show that there is a Creator. Hence, carefully understood, natural theology as a project is not committed to deliver a Trinitarian understanding of God since to think and talk about God as Triune requires us to think and talk about the Persons in the Godhead. But that is not up to the project of natural theology to say. *Natural theology aims at delivering truths about the divine attributes shared by the Three Persons in the Godhead.* That is what I have been referring to as the goal of natural theology—to establish the existence and nature of God qua Creator. Romans 1:19-20 reads, "... what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."<sup>39</sup> The text just cited does not imply that God's triune nature has been made plain. The triune nature of God, as the God of salvation history who enters this created world for the purpose of redemption, goes beyond the goal and scope of natural

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<sup>38</sup> For more on this, see my: "A Missed Opportunity" available here: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=168&mode=detail>.

<sup>39</sup> (NIV)



theology since redemptive evidence goes beyond possession of mere knowledge of the Creator. The needed redemptive evidence for God or knowledge of God comes to humans from the triune God by means of special revelation in Scripture and the Incarnation.

I have argued that Premise (1) of the reconstructed argument is false for several reasons I have provided above. Hence, the argument, which captures Davis' objection to my suggestion that natural theology can and should be part of an exercise in Christian philosophy, is unsound. I have also shown that Davis' original argument (i.e. DA) fails to show his main claim that since natural theology is not directly about Christ it cannot be an example of Christian philosophy.<sup>40</sup>

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