

Doubting theology: Wisdom—divine and human

by [P. Travis Kroeker](#) 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](#).

In keeping with the intellectual tradition of classic liberal Protestantism, James Gustafson has devoted his distinguished career to testing the faith claims of traditional Christianity against the truth claims of the secular sciences. To isolate Christian teachings and practices from secular perspectives that may require a radical revision of Christianity, Gustafson argues, is not only intellectually suspect; it is morally and theologically offensive. It is an egregious denial of the very object of Christian theological concern, namely, God and God’s relation to the created world. Self-isolating, sectarian theology is sinful theology, Gustafson believes. Thus framed, it is hard to disagree.

Self-isolating theology has devastating consequences for the church and for ministry because it requires Christians to separate their religious lives from their public, secular lives, creating cognitive and moral dissonance. It is devastating for theology and theological ethics because it makes those disciplines unintelligible to other disciplines in the university: theologians end up speaking a language of idiotic specialization with little moral relevance or intellectual purchase in the wider culture.

The sectarian form that most troubles Gustafson is not that of agrarian religious communities like the Amish but those academically prominent movements—variously labeled “postliberal” or “radical traditions” or “radical orthodoxy”—which are critical of modernity, secular liberalism and the Enlightenment project. According to Gustafson, these movements tempt Christians to retreat from critical engagement with the “liberating curriculum” of the modern secular disciplines, especially the natural and social sciences.

What is it that Christians ought to be liberated from, in Gustafson’s view, and why are these Christian critics of modernity nevertheless so appealing with their siren call to retreat into the imprisoning caves of unexamined faith? This is an especially important question given Gustafson’s descriptive premise that the secular is the primary discourse in our culture, that “Bible-speak” and traditional theological discourse seldom constitute the primary language even for Christians as they seek to understand their lives, whether personally or socially. The discourses of our secular “scientifically informed culture” inevitably shape the common sense of Christian theologians, pastors and laypeople in ways that call into question traditional beliefs and practices and that liberate us (here Gustafson’s claim turns normative) from their false and inhibiting intellectual and moral claims.

If Gustafson’s descriptive premise is true (and who can gainsay its considerable empirical veracity?), it becomes all the more surprising that the traditionalist critics, largely found in universities and cultured cosmopolitan centers, who publish learned books that seek to defend the truth of traditional Christian faith and the biblical vision of reality, appeal to anyone. What is it about biblical language that still addresses people (and perhaps not only traditional Christians) with its claims, calling modern, scientific common sense into question even when such common sense pervasively defines our world?

I expect Gustafson might explain the appeal by saying that traditional Christianity appeals to our egoistic anthropocentrism, since it teaches (as Gustafson depicts it)

that “all things were created for the human” by a personal God in whose image we are made, and that the Christian doctrine of the resurrection consoles our fears about suffering and mortality and caters to our desire to live eternally beyond death, suffering and evil.

Such a religious faith, Gustafson might claim—agreeing here with accounts of these doctrines set forth in the 19th century by such thinkers as Nietzsche and Feuerbach—lacks contact with reality. Worse, it contributes to irresponsibly escapist fantasies that distract us from taking realistic worldly action grounded in the stoical acceptance of our limited mortal agency and significance in an infinite impersonal cosmos. Gustafson might also say that appeals to traditional texts—whether the Bible, Augustine, Calvin or Jonathan Edwards—are in principle misguided insofar as they derive from “less complex” times and places.

Gustafson raises important intellectual challenges and identifies certain dangers of self-isolating theology. It seems to me, however, that the “besetting sin” that tempts contemporary Christianity is not only or even primarily the “rejection of modernity” evidenced by authoritarian, closed-minded fundamentalists or postmodern Christian intellectuals, who seek to out-narrate all rivals in the academic power game. The “besetting sin” may also be found in the liberal “accommodation” and “absorption” strategies that accept uncritically Kant’s Enlightenment motto, in which Horace’s *sapere aude* (dare to be wise) is translated, “Have the courage to use your own understanding!” To this I am tempted to counterpose Proverbs 3:5f. in order to raise again the question of where liberating understanding is to be found—challenging the modern temptation to lean upon our own understanding, our own public secular reason.

But here I dare not appear to be deliberately unintelligible and obscurantist. It is important to try to be particular and precise about where the conflicts and challenges lie. Gustafson criticizes critics of modernity who operate at high levels of metaphysical and epistemological abstraction, and in the same vein, generalized references to “scientifically informed culture,” the “Enlightenment project,” and the “secular” over against the “religious” do not clarify matters. I will discuss below a couple of specific examples of the conflict of interpretation which are alluded to by Gustafson himself.

First, however, I want to contest Gustafson’s caricature of Christian critics of liberal modernity as those who simply reject modernity, who speak in an autonomous

religious language unintelligible to the secular world because they are not engaged with it. Consider the example of Fyodor Dostoevsky, who is a powerful, prophetic critic of modernity precisely because he is not a detached religious critic but an engaged one, immersed in modernity's imagination and living within its central questions and challenges. Anyone who reads Dostoevsky simply as a "rejection strategy" will be hard-pressed to defend such an interpretation.

Does this mean that he simply accommodates his Christian vision to modern secularist ideologies? By no means. Dostoevsky's art displays a deep internalization of the biblical word within the discourses of modernity, which enables him to narrate and unveil the spiritual crisis within modern secularism with penetrating clarity.

Let us now consider two Christian teachings mentioned by Gustafson as being incompatible with modern secular scientific realism. The first is Calvin's interpretation of divine providence with reference to Psalm 8. Calvin celebrates God's providence in preparing food for infants in mothers' breasts—though, as Calvin notes, some mothers' breasts provide more abundant food than others, in keeping with the divine will (*Institutes* I, XVI, 3). Rather than offer a biological account of the differences in lactation, Calvin relates these differences to divine providential causality.

Calvin's account is preceded by Augustine's meditation on his infancy (who am I? whence did I come to be? whence comes the human desire to praise the divine creator?):

So I was welcomed by the consolations of human milk; but it was not my mother or my nurses who made any decision to fill their breasts (*ubera*), but you who through them gave me infant food, in accordance with your ordinance and the riches which are distributed deep in the natural order (*Confessions* I, vi, 7).

Both Calvin and Augustine bring together the spiritual meaning of embodied goods, the biological and the providential, in an affirmation of the ordering of love—both divine and human—that sustains breast-feeding. They are offering more than a description of physiological lactation.

It is this sacramental integrity, if I may so depict it, that enables Augustine (that much maligned "body-hater"!) later in the *Confessions* (IX, x, 24) to express with

resonance the erotic mystical ascent he shared with his mother, Monica, in the garden at Ostia toward Wisdom herself, portrayed as a “region of inexhaustible abundance” (*regio ubertatis indificientibus*) who breast-feeds Israel with truth food.

Do we say, upon reading this passage: “Too bad Augustine got his biology mixed up with his theology”? Do we say: “What has poetry to do with truth claims”? Can there not be a lived integrity, not only poetically entertaining but metaphysically significant, in joining breast-feeding, mystical ascent and providential divine wisdom? Do we experience here an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance as moderns? Would we be embarrassed to speak this way, and if so, why? Is it because we have lost something in our primary discourse about human experience insofar as our speech and common sense have become accommodated to the dead metaphors of modern secular scientific discourse?

We can stick with Augustine to consider a second problematic Christian teaching alluded to by Gustafson—original sin. This teaching is difficult to maintain, it would seem, in the face of the complex interaction of “two information systems”—those of genetics and (secular) culture. Augustine’s account of the deficient causality that results in the defection of human wills from the true order of being and goodness (a defection that is transmitted both culturally and genetically) can be rendered intelligible only in the context of a personal, spiritual divine ordering agency that is nevertheless rationally present in bodily reality, including human sexuality and procreation. It is precisely such a divine causality beyond finite human reason that cannot be rendered rationally intelligible by human *scientia*, especially those sciences that collect and organize data according to impersonal, instrumental measures.

I do not wish to defend (nor to imply agreement with) everything Augustine has to say about the ways in which human sexuality and procreation are implicated in original sin and its transmission. But I do want to suggest that his interpretation of the biblical account may help to render intelligible our own modern sexual experience and its many pathologies in ways that our genetic, physiological and psycho-chemical accounts may not. This is not to dismiss or to reject the latter; it is to maintain that the latter cannot simply be appealed to as the primary public authorities for what may or may not be rationally believed.

Are those who wish to read the biblical and Augustinian accounts of human temptation and sinful defection as serious, rational accounts being “sectarian”?

What if the “sectarian secularism” or “sectarian scientism” of our public life leads us to ignore the rich resources of biblical and Christian tradition for addressing the malaises of modernity, a secular modernity that so often wishes to marginalize or privatize religious voices and truth claims from the outset as having nothing to do with “common sense”?

The point is that if sin is a principle of personality—and not merely individual personality but social or corporate personality because human existence is a social existence—then it may not be comprehended directly or translated speculatively into an order of rational control or logical necessity (indeed, this would, ironically, be to understand it sinfully). It will have to be interpreted and communicated “dramatically” and in the language of myth or story that respects the kind of reality it is, namely, having to do with divine-human relation.

In the biblical account (and in Augustine’s and Kierkegaard’s interpretations of this account), sin is itself an offense that offends rational human understanding. The teaching of original sin, of human sinfulness, is by definition an offense to our own understanding, since it can be seen only when we are being called back into relation with a wisdom that transcends that understanding. It cannot be grasped by a human *gnosis* or knowing; it can only be repented of by forgiving love, a divine possibility.

Of course, all of that requires a longer narrative and the habituation to its principled speech and practices that we may call “traditional Christianity.” But the point is not to believe or simply assent to a tradition and its discourses; it is to allow the truth claims of that tradition to be tested in real life, without either excluding or privileging interaction with the discourses of the secular human and natural sciences.

The truth claims of Christian faith, furthermore, are not simply a matter of informational knowledge. Perhaps the greatest temptation for Christian theologians and ethicists of whatever stripe is to want to know “like God”—whether that be the knowledge of the doctrinal tradition or the knowledge of the modern sciences. The temptation is no more or less complex today than it has ever been, rooted as it is in the human desire to transform “godlikeness” into one’s own possession for purposes of control and domination, rather than accepting it as God’s gift to be shared in the posture of humble, serving love.

The most difficult and complex time in which to live by faith is always one's own. It is tempting to want to avoid this fate either by retreating into an imagined, more simple past and its secure knowledge, or by accommodating the difficult disciplines of faithful obedience to the powerful and controlling human wisdoms of the day, the *saeculum* (time or age) in which one dwells.

The Christian faith at its center confesses that both the content and the human form of divine wisdom is revealed in Christ—whose example of humility and serving love is scandalous to both such strategies. The wisdom of God is foolishness to discursive human reason (whether doctrinal or scientific) that seeks to possess certain knowledge for itself; and the power of God is weakness to those human traditions (whether religious or secular) that seek to control and dominate the *saeculum*. What the alternative might be is known only to the eye of faith.