

# Formulating Theology *In Der Luft*: A Critical Evaluation of Nancey Murphy's Postmodern Theological Method

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## Introduction

Among recent developments in evangelical theological method, none is more intriguing and few are more original than that proposed by Nancey Murphy. Incorporating material from new investigations in philosophy of science, recent models in metaethics, philosophy of religion, rhetoric, biblical studies, nonreductive psychology, and a Radical Reformation perspective on theology, Murphy seeks to move theological method forward in a direction that she claims is faithful to Scripture and more appropriate to intellectual currents in the contemporary world, without at the same time being *modernistic*. She calls for a truly *postmodern method*—not a postmodernism in the de(con)structive vein of Lyotard, Barthes, and Foucault, but a postmodernism in the reserved, yet constructive, tradition of Anglo-American analytic thought and of neo-pragmatism.

Murphy is Associate Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Fuller Theological Seminary. She earned a doctorate in philosophy of science from University of California at Berkeley under the direction of Paul Feyerabend. After completing that work, she obtained a second doctorate at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley under the tutelage of James William McClendon, Jr. Murphy grew up a Roman Catholic, passed through a stage in her life

in which she affiliated with the Charismatic Movement, and now stands within the broad tradition of Radical Reformation (Anabaptist) theology. Murphy acknowledges that her intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage have played a crucial role in the development of her thought.<sup>1</sup>

This essay will examine the major contours of Nancey Murphy's theological method. First it will take note of her desire to initiate a new approach that moves beyond liberalism and fundamentalism. Second, it will examine her proposal for a new methodology that incorporates insights from one model of contemporary scientific method. Third, it will look at her attempt to apply this method to an actual problem in apologetics and dogmatics. It will conclude with some questions concerning the viability of her method for a truly evangelical theology.

## Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism

Murphy argues that the historic conflict between liberal and conservative<sup>2</sup> theology is unfortunate. Moreover, she contends that liberals and conservatives have more in common than they usually acknowledge. Specifically, they share a common methodological starting point in that both sides employ a foundationalist

epistemology that arises from Enlightenment principles.

### *After Foundationalism*

*Foundationalism* refers to the tendency of Cartesian and, to some extent, Lockean epistemologies to construct all of knowledge upon self-evident and indubitable foundations. Foundationalism is “the view that mediately justified beliefs require epistemic support for their validity in immediately justified beliefs,” or that “systems of knowledge, in content and method, require first principles.”<sup>3</sup> Foundationalists contend that in the process of justifying knowledge claims, “the chain of justifying evidence cannot go on *ad infinitum* if we are ever to be in a position to claim that we have actually justified our knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> “Classical foundationalism”<sup>5</sup> then is the attempt to find an Archimedean Point from which one’s entire system can be recursively built.

Stephen Toulmin proposes in his highly influential work, *Cosmopolis*, that this epistemological move had its origins in the seventeenth century in the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-48) and the terrible corporate insecurity that it foisted on European intellectuals.<sup>6</sup> Philosophers who toiled in the shadow of that conflagration sought firm footing in their search for *veritas*. Renaissance perspectives on truth and metaphysics were no longer sufficient since they had not been up to the task of enabling intelligent Europeans to avert the holocaust of the wars of religion. A more unified theory of knowledge was needed, and Descartes,<sup>7</sup> Leibniz, and Locke stepped up to the plate to provide such alternatives.<sup>8</sup>

Descartes wistfully proffered, “I shall have the right to entertain high hopes, if I

am fortunate enough to find only one thing which is certain and indubitable.”<sup>9</sup>

The French philosopher sought to ground his system in a set of rational first principles, principles that were, then, metaphysical in orientation. An empiricist version of this passion for epistemological certainty was articulated by Locke.

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters without any ideas: How then comes it to be furnished? . . . First, our Senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey to the mind several distinct perceptions of things. . . . And thus we come by those *ideas* we have of *yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet*, and all those which we call sensible qualities.<sup>10</sup>

There does seem to be less of the indubitable triumphalism in this project than that which is proposed by Descartes, but certainly similar ideas are found here. The empirical form of foundationalism came to its most consistent expression in the logical positivism of such figures as Carnap, Ayer, and the early Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein began the *Tractatus* with the observation, “The world is all that is the case.”<sup>11</sup> After spending seventy tortuous pages delineating what can and cannot be included in his theory of the declarative sentence, he concluded it with, “What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.”<sup>12</sup> Common to both the Cartesian and the positivist systems is the belief that philosophy is “largely an exercise in epistemology.”<sup>13</sup>

The foundationalist enterprises of Descartes and of the later positivists constituted a search for a rational or empirical starting point that was clear, indubitable, and noninferential, a starting point whose delineation would then set the pattern for the philosophical edifice

that each would then construct.<sup>14</sup> This approach to epistemology has been dealt severe blows by recent thinkers, particularly thinkers in the Anglo-American tradition. Early criticisms were offered by William James and Charles Sanders Peirce, each of whom contended in his own way that philosophical inquiry was not for the purpose of articulating epistemological grounds for knowledge, but was rather a tool to clarify thinking in order that habits of practical conduct could be reformulated.<sup>15</sup> It was Wittgenstein, however, who delivered the most telling blow to the foundationalist project. Abandoning his earlier positivist position (wherein he believed that he had solved all philosophical problems), the Cambridge professor proposed that language does not convey a picture of reality, but rather reflects local realms of discourse. Each local realm ultimately serves pragmatic ends and must, therefore, be evaluated only within its own confines.<sup>16</sup> Since there is no metalanguage, with one universal key to determining all of reality, specific languages are only sets of social pragmatics marked out by specific linguistic communities.<sup>17</sup> For Wittgenstein, *philosophy* was the attempt to remove the bewitchment to understanding caused by language. This means that there is no such thing as final truth, construed as correspondence to reality, since each community of discourse does nothing more than attempt to mark out, in a coherent fashion, the language game endemic to that community. At best, truth is judged by the coherence of the game, or perhaps only as that which works.<sup>18</sup> The search for indubitable and noninferential foundations to universal truth claims, it would seem, had now been permanently banished from the field of

respectable intellectual inquiry.

Other thinkers have figured prominently in the decline of foundationalism. Karl Popper wrote in 1935 that even the empirical basis of science has nothing absolute about it. "The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles."<sup>19</sup> If even science is no longer on firm moorings, what hope can one have for other disciplines? Willard van Orman Quine then proposed a new metaphor for knowledge. Rather than think in terms of foundations upon which beliefs are constructed, he proposed that knowledge is like a web or a net. This new metaphor offers the notion that all items within the web are of relatively equal value and that one might approach the construction of a belief system at virtually any place within the entire web, rather than beginning at some supposed starting point. There is now, perhaps, no starting point at all, or at least no common starting point for each intellectual endeavor.

### *Murphy on Foundationalism*

Murphy describes foundationalism as "a theory about how claims to know can be justified."<sup>20</sup> She proceeds,

When we try to justify a belief, we do so by relating it to (basing it on, deriving it from) other beliefs. If these other beliefs are called into question, then they, too, must be justified. Foundationalists insist that this chain of justification must stop somewhere; it must not be circular, nor must it constitute an infinite regress. Thus, the regress must end in a 'foundation' of beliefs that cannot themselves be called into question.<sup>21</sup>

The Fuller professor also indicates that there are criteria that can be applied to arguments to determine whether they are

foundationalist in structure.<sup>22</sup> First, such arguments assume “that knowledge systems must include a class of beliefs that are somehow immune from challenge.”<sup>23</sup> Second, they also operate on the premise that “all reasoning proceeds in one direction only—from that set of special, indubitable beliefs to others, but not the reverse.”<sup>24</sup> This is the classical Cartesian system, of course, and its descendants can be found within various theological models in the last three and a half centuries.

There is also another version of foundationalism, in Murphy’s opinion, one more congenial both to science and to traditional Christian convictions. Locke was an empiricist who contended that empirical science was founded on ideas from sensory experience. He was also a Christian and was convinced that Christ was the Messiah and the Bible was God’s revelation, his extraordinary way of communication. Just how did Locke know that the Christian faith was the true faith, the anticipated revelation from God? For him, the miracles in Scripture, along with fulfilled prophecies, served as apologetic evidence for the truthfulness of the faith. Reasoning from publicly testable sense experience and from generally acknowledged historical “facts,” he believed it was possible to establish the truth of the Christian faith as quite plausible. Locke thus combined a confidence in empirical science with a historical, evidentiary approach to testing Christian truth claims as the basis for his assurance that Christianity is true and the Bible trustworthy. Murphy labels this “scriptural foundational[ism].”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, those who use this method in service of the Church do not restrict its service to apologetics alone, but also employ it in articulating a comprehensive theological hermeneutic.

### *Who Are the Foundationalists?*

Murphy presents her case that both liberal and fundamentalist theologies are implicitly foundationalist. Among the conservatives, the theological formulations of both Charles Hodge and Augustus Strong were directly influenced by Thomas Reid’s Lockean apologetic.<sup>26</sup> Strong notes that he “takes the material furnished by Biblical and Historical Theology and with this material seeks to build up into an organic and consistent whole all our knowledge of God and of the relations between God and the universe.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Hodge offered that the “duty of the Christian theologian is to ascertain, collect, and combine all the facts which God has revealed in the Bible.”<sup>28</sup> Murphy places both of these theologians in the foundationalist camp, since the form of reasoning found in each matches the criteria she established earlier—they use Scripture as a “ground,” from which they construct “theology as building.”<sup>29</sup>

Strong and Hodge represent a kind of Protestant scholasticism with a technical style and a lumbering formality not found in more recent evangelical theology texts. One might conclude that this exhausts her understanding of what constitutes foundationalism in evangelical theology. That this is not the case is clear since she includes in her critique the works of Donald Bloesch and Alister McGrath, two figures who are not generally considered to be “rationalistic.” Bloesch is a “biblical foundationalist,” according to Murphy, and “explicitly”<sup>30</sup> so, since he even employs the designation “foundations” as the title for his new seven-volume project in systematic theology.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, while Bloesch does not consider biblical words as the ground for erecting a theological edifice, he does dis-

tinguish between historical events and their “revelational meaning,” so apparently resorting to the fact-value distinction. More significantly, he believes the authority of the Bible is unquestionable.

So we see here a softening of the original foundationalist demand for *universally* accessible truth based on *indubitable* foundations. Yet despite the hesitancy regarding inerrancy (and the absolute certitude such a doctrine provides), it is still the case that the authority of Scripture [for Bloesch] is *unchallengeable*. There is no other norm by which it can be called into question, not religious experience, church teaching, or culture.<sup>32</sup>

Bloesch fails the test of being a post-modern theologian since he maintains a commitment to biblical factuality and inerrancy, even though his is a guarded and highly qualified affirmation of inerrancy.<sup>33</sup>

Alister McGrath is also a foundationalist, in Murphy’s view, a “narrative foundationalist, rather than a scriptural foundationalist.”<sup>34</sup> He “gives biblical revelation an unchallenged role in theology,”<sup>35</sup> by arguing that the Bible is “the ultimate source of Christian theology.”<sup>36</sup> McGrath goes on to affirm that Scripture serves this role in its historical witness to Israel and Christ.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, he notes, “The narrative of Jesus Christ, mediated through Scripture and eucharistic celebration, is presented, proclaimed, and accepted as the foundational and controlling narrative of the community of faith.”<sup>38</sup> Murphy observes,

Doctrine provides a conceptual structure by which scriptural narrative is interpreted. McGrath recognizes that doctrinal formulations can lead us to reread the narrative in a different light, and so there is a sense of two-way interchange between the

foundation and the superstructure. Thus we can see that McGrath is chafing against the foundationalist model, even while he uses especially vivid foundationalist imagery in describing the relation between the scriptural narrative and the doctrinal superstructure.<sup>39</sup>

Murphy seems convinced that moving from narrative to conceptual formulation is itself a foundationalist, and hence, an Enlightenment, move.

Liberal theology is also foundationalist, but in a different way than conservative theology. Conservatism proceeds from the conviction that the Bible is trustworthy and may be mined for the data of theology. Liberalism, on the other hand, proceeds from the supposition that the religious person possesses an immediate consciousness of the deity. Theology here is founded on religious experience. So, Fosdick could argue that doctrines “spring from” and express the religious life.<sup>40</sup> Scripture then comes along as a confirming voice in religious life, but is not itself the first speaker. Shailer Mathews noted that Christianity is not the acceptance of a literature but a reproduction of attitudes and faith. Religion, for him, was a matter of experience, attitudes, and moral beliefs, while doctrines are “verbal expressions of religious life,” which are to be “judged on the basis of their effectiveness in inspiring religious convictions and loyalties.”<sup>41</sup> Likewise, David Tracy urges that the Bible is a literary classic: Such classics are themselves works of art that express an event of understanding, but this has nothing to do with any notion that the Bible contains cognitive truth that might transform the thinking of those who read it. Rather, it simply facilitates our renewal by its ability to shock us into new ways of being. But the experience always comes first.<sup>42</sup>

Murphy categorizes these two methods, the conservative over against the liberal, as *outside-in* and *inside-out*. Conservatives use an *outside-in* epistemology.<sup>43</sup> They look for an external authority, Scripture. Then, having established its truthfulness to their satisfaction, they conclude that its theological and spiritual truths are adequate for life. This is essentially a Lockean approach, since he began with an account of the world and then later explained the mind in terms of that external knowledge. Liberals utilize an *inside-out* approach in which they claim that their own experience constitutes divine authority. This then allows them to make certain claims about God and salvation that they hold with equally firm vigor. Such a method stems from the Cartesian foundationalist model, and has been extremely influential among modern epistemologists, as well as among Christian liberals.<sup>44</sup>

At the end of the day, both approaches are foundationalist and constitute an inappropriate approach to epistemology in this postmodern world. Thus, Murphy proposes a substitute for foundationalism: *epistemological holism*. Utilizing Quine's metaphor of the web, along with Wittgenstein's notion of local languages of discourse, Murphy contends that it is possible to do theology without taking sides either with conservatives or liberals, or, more precisely, by taking sides against both of them.<sup>45</sup> With Frei, she proposes that the old battle lines have been improperly drawn, and that the two warring groups are actually on the same side, even though neither of them seems willing to recognize that.

"Liberals" and "fundamentalists" must start over if they are to engage in relevant theological discourse. There are at least

three components to this new strategy. First, theologians must employ new reading strategies on the biblical text. They ought to take the Bible literally, "so long as they begin with the Sermon on the Mount,"<sup>46</sup> and so long as they utilize a narrative hermeneutic, even in the didactic texts.<sup>47</sup> Second, they must abandon the attempt to justify taking Scripture as authoritative, "since to do so is what it means to be a Christian theologian."<sup>48</sup> Instead they should accept David Kelsey's claim that the statement "Christian Scripture is authoritative for Christian theology" is analytic.<sup>49</sup> That is, theologians already treat Scripture as the context for their web of reality. There is no need to articulate a theory for just how Scripture functions. That would, in fact, be counterproductive, for the root of the liberal/fundamentalist debate lies in the failure of foundationalists to find a "single set of indubitable foundations."<sup>50</sup> Third, theologians must recognize that traditions always begin with some finite starting point. "A tradition is a historically extended, socially embodied argument about how best to interpret and apply the formative texts."<sup>51</sup> This means that all systems are socially constructed, and, while Murphy does not wish to be aligned with the radical postmodernists, she urges at least a mild sort of deconstructionism of the inherited traditions so that theologians can clear the ground and move forward with the new project.<sup>52</sup>

### **A Scientific Approach to Theological Method**

Having established that theology needs a new starting point beyond liberalism and fundamentalism, Murphy offers a creative proposal for how to do just that. Her first published monograph was *The-*

ology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning, a volume that won the AAR's 1992 award for excellence in the study of religion. Here she argues that theology has never yet truly met the challenge of David Hume head-on.<sup>53</sup> Hume's was an assault on any attempt at formulating a unified-field theory of theological knowledge claims. After demonstrating to his own satisfaction the unlikelihood of revelation and miracle, he then turned his attention to the teleological argument, arguing that the existence of evil in the world is *prima facie* evidence against the notion of divine creation and design.

### **Hume: The Problem**

Murphy notes that theologians have been divided in their response to Hume.<sup>54</sup> Some have accepted his critique and have subsequently sought for vindication of religion and theology outside the cognitive domain. Others have ignored the crisis and gone about their business as though Hume had never written, an attitude which, in Murphy's view, has resulted in such persons becoming isolated from and irrelevant to their host cultures.<sup>55</sup>

The first type of response to Hume has attracted much support. Kant paved this path and Schleiermacher and other liberals in the nineteenth century walked down it by removing religious thought to the moral sphere or to the realm of experience.<sup>56</sup> Kant bypassed the questions of the cognitive certainty of the faith and instead relegated Christian truth to the moral sphere and the realm of practical reason. Schleiermacher also separated religion from the realm of science, but placed it in the context of feeling, an immediate awareness of the divine prior to the discrimination between subject and

object that lies at the basis of scientific thinking.

Barth is typical of the other reaction to Hume. The Swiss theologian claimed that the revelation of God in Christ is the sole condition of whatever knowledge we might have of him. Theology is an attempt to seek partial knowledge of what we believe because of grace—*fides quaerens intellectum*. Barth's rejection of apologetics is well known, but this rejection is in essence his attempt to solve the Humean problem. He does so, however, at the expense of removing the public character of theology.

Murphy wishes to find a new way between Schleiermacher and Barth, a way she sees partially exemplified in Pannenberg. The Munich theologian returns theology to the realm of public discourse, even offering a point-by-point counter to the criticisms of Hume, and makes a case that theology must have the character of a scientific enterprise.<sup>57</sup> He criticized Barth for what he calls "scriptural positivism," but he avoids the reductionism of the liberal school, even to the point of accepting the resurrection of Christ as a datum of theology. However, Murphy argues that Pannenberg's system fails at two points. It fails first in that Pannenberg sought to assume the insights of Hume into his own system, but failed to recognize that his own method does not allow for the incorporation of alien thought-forms without the destruction of his own theological system. The two approaches are incommensurable. This method fails, secondly, in that it depends on a theory of scientific method, that of Stephen Toulmin, which itself is unworkable.<sup>58</sup>

### **A "Scientific" Solution**

Histories of the philosophy of science

often begin with the logical positivists, especially members of the Vienna Circle, who in the 1920s revolted against Hegelian and Kantian idealism. They attempted to distinguish between science and metaphysics and to reconstruct all scientific knowledge from experience.<sup>59</sup> But there were too many problems endemic to this system, problems that became clear with the proposal of Girdle's theorem and with the discovery that the verification principle was itself self-defeating. Popper took the next major step in noting that science is characterized by the fact that its theories are falsifiable.<sup>60</sup> This made science into a respectable sphere for Popper, and elevated it above other types of "knowledge" which often were not falsifiable through research. But the real breakthrough came with Thomas Kuhn's remarkable book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, a book that demonstrated the dependence of theory choice in science on factors other than observation and logic. Kuhn observed that science proceeds through a series of epistemes in which certain dominant patterns reign supreme, but which are eventually succeeded by other paradigms when the disciplinary matrix becomes over-extended.<sup>61</sup> Once a paradigm is accepted, its basic laws and theories are not subject to testing, but are rather assumed and used for the solving of the many problems that a paradigm encounters. The new model is only repudiated when the cycle occurs all over again at a later time. The advantage of Kuhn's proposal over that of Toulmin is that Toulmin had difficulty explaining progress in science.

In the years since Kuhn first published his book (1962), his views have been incorporated by two thinkers who have moved in diametrically opposite direc-

tions. Imre Lakatos proposed that a scientific rationality requires the specification of a criterion for choice between competing "research programs."<sup>62</sup> A research program consists of a set of theories and a body of data. One theory, the "hard core," is central to the program. It is the definition of the project itself. The subordinate, or auxiliary, hypotheses constitute the supporting evidence. Lakatos argued that the history of science is best understood not in terms of successive paradigms, as Kuhn argued, but in terms of competing research programs, some of which are positive and progressive while others are degenerating.<sup>63</sup> A degenerating research program is one whose core theory is saved only by *ad hoc* modifications of the protective belt—what he called face-saving devices. A research program is said to be progressive when the following conditions are met: (1) each new version of the theory preserves the unfuted content of its predecessor; (2) each has excess empirical content over its predecessor in that it predicts some novel, hitherto unexpected facts; and (3) some of its predicted facts are corroborated.<sup>64</sup>

The second post-Kuhnian model is that of Paul Feyerabend, a self-styled intellectual anarchist.<sup>65</sup> He has argued that all methodology, if imposed on a research program, is inherently restrictive and arbitrary. There are several reasons for this, according to Feyerabend, but two are central. First, all science is specifically ideological and is often tied to the power structures of any society, since it requires funding for research to take place, and such funding will usually come from big business or from the government, both of which have a stake in the outcome of the research. Even more fundamentally, since science does not and cannot correspond

to what is out there in nature, there can never be a viable method for doing scientific work. As Feyerabend puts it, "The task of the scientist, however, is no longer to 'search for truth,' [but] 'to make the weaker case the stronger,' as the sophists said, and thereby to sustain the motion of the whole."<sup>66</sup> Research then becomes an infinite proliferation of language games, none of which has any higher claim to authority than any other. The Berkeley philosopher even contends that voodoo, since it has a material basis, is a viable method for scientific exploration; it is only the Western affection for the Baconian and Cartesian traditions that makes "modern" persons reject such an approach.<sup>67</sup> In a series of debates with Lakatos, Feyerabend urged that science is inherently irrational, and that the only principle that does not inhibit free research is the conviction, "anything goes." Here is the concomitant in science to the deconstructive tradition of Lyotard and Derrida in philosophy.<sup>68</sup>

Murphy argues that Lakatos's model of scientific research programs is a viable candidate for finding a way out of the theological dilemma foisted upon the modern world by Hume, without either opting for the incommensurability approach of Barth or the reductive approach of Schleiermacher.<sup>69</sup> First, one establishes a hard core. Second, one appends an auxiliary hypothesis comprising secondary theses that demonstrate that the program is progressive rather than degenerating (i.e., it does not offer inadequate solutions or a piecemeal defensive strategy).<sup>70</sup> These auxiliaries may include historical theology, epistemological theories, insights gained from social sciences, proposals in meta-ethics, "charismatic" experiences in church life,

biblical interpretation, and other kinds of data. Lakatos's model for a research program and Quine's metaphor for epistemology (the web) thus come together in one unified methodological approach. Murphy demonstrates the usability of her approach by an analysis of several theologians, Catholic, Reformed and Anabaptist.<sup>71</sup>

For Murphy, doctrines are heuristic, problem solving devices. They stem from the shared experience of the community of faith, and have as their data Scriptural texts, natural science, social science, rhetorical theory, historical theology, and contemporary culture. She thus eschews what she perceives to be foundational approaches to doctrinal construction, which constantly recur to the same basis for authority, whether they be the outside-in system of traditional orthodoxy, the inside-out method of liberalism, or even the biblical foundationalism of neo-orthodoxy.<sup>72</sup> She calls rather for a network of roughly equal partners to share in the task of theological articulation.

### **Neuroscience and the Problem of the "Soul"**

Some theologians have written important works on methodology but have published little showing how their program should be carried out in practice. This is not the case with Professor Murphy. How does holding to a Lakatosian, non-foundationalist methodology impact the way one would formulate doctrinal statements? What does apologetics look like in the postmodern system of Nancey Murphy? The issue of neuroscience and the problem of the "soul" serves as an illuminating example of her method at work.

### *Background to the Debate*

In recent years various intellectuals have often called into question the idea that the human person is made of two completely different “substances,” one physical, and the other nonphysical. This of course is not a new discussion. Plato proposed nearly 2500 years ago that humans were body and soul, with the soul being an immaterial substance that was eternal and that survived death to return to the realm from which it came. The “soul,” in Plato’s understanding of it, is the *real* person. Epicurean philosophers, though, along with other atomists, held that the body is all there is, or at least, if there is a *soul*, it is also material in nature.

The debate has raged on in the history of the West, but in recent years, *science* has entered the fray in a bold and dogmatic fashion. Philosophers of science, such as the members of the Vienna Circle, ruled out of court any suggestion that there might be a soul, defined as an intangible, non-material part of the human person. From the circles of science also have come studies that conclude that the human person is a psychosomatic unity, and that traditional views of the soul as an immaterial substratum or spiritual entity are simply no longer tenable.<sup>73</sup> “If [the standard understanding of neo-Darwinian] is the correct view of our origins, then there seems neither need, nor room, to fit any nonphysical substances or properties into our theoretical account of ourselves. We are creatures of matter. And we should learn to live with that fact.”<sup>74</sup> Likewise philosophers such as John Searle have determined that mental properties are simply biological features of human organisms, so that mind is merely a function of matter, nothing more.<sup>75</sup>

### *Murphy’s Solution*

Murphy also rejects the notion of the soul as a substance separate from the body.<sup>76</sup> She notes, correctly, that in Scripture, “soul” is not spoken of in terms consistent with Platonism. Rather, the biblical terms *nephesh* and *psyche* have a range of meanings that sometimes include the physical body itself, and other times states of emotional euphoria or distress.<sup>77</sup> She concludes from her brief excursion into the biblical doctrine of the soul that the New Testament does not present a clear picture, and that the reader will “end up frustrated and confused.”<sup>78</sup> She concludes, though, that there are two possible solutions that arise out of the biblical data. Christians can be faithful to Scripture while holding either to holistic dualism or to non-reductive physicalism. These are the two centrist positions, with eternal, metaphysical dualism (Plato) at the one extreme and reductive physicalism (committed naturalists) at the other.<sup>79</sup>

Since the biblical material is inconsistent and confusing, how might one make a decision between these two apparently viable options? Murphy appeals to modern examinations in the field of neuroscience and to models of psychology that are compatible with those new studies. While most Christian theologians have held to a form of holistic dualism or substance dualism, Murphy believes this is no longer defensible in our time. “I argue that what neuroscience shows is that such an organism [the human person] is indeed capable of all those higher human capacities that have been attributed to the soul.”<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, “Our brain, with its large neo-cortex, is what enables us to recognize God’s holiness, to recognize a still small voice as the word of God.”<sup>81</sup> The “soul” traditionally understood, is noth-

ing more than the material substance of the human person.

Next Murphy adduces support for her position from the Radical Reformation tradition. This essay has already noted that for various reasons, Murphy has come to affirm the Anabaptist tradition as the one most faithful to her understanding of genuine Christianity. The Anabaptist heritage plays a role in her anthropology as well, since there were many among the radical wing of the Reformation who held to an unconscious intermediate state.<sup>82</sup> This lends further support to her conviction about the soul. Since she rejects all forms of substance or holistic dualism, she also denies that anything within the human person survives the moment of death. Rather, believers are rendered unconscious until the moment of the final resurrection of the dead.<sup>83</sup>

Here is a clear example of the Quinean web as epistemological model. Murphy does not base her position on any metaphysical system *per se*, nor is she a biblical foundationalist, since she rejects the notion that one can find a clear answer to this anthropological concern in the Bible. What she does do is weave together a complex system of ideas from science, philosophy, historical theology, the Bible, and psychology. It is an exceedingly democratic methodology, as all contributors are allowed to have their say, though eventually the strongest voice will rise to the fore and make its will known. In this case, the strongest voices come from science and one segment of the Christian tradition.

### **Critique**

Is Murphy's system a viable approach for evangelicals? Granting for the moment that the term "evangelical" refers to those

whose theology is governed primarily by Scripture, is her method acceptable? Only a few observations can be offered at this point.

There are some helpful features of this proposal. First, she is correct that some theologians in both liberal and conservative camps have been overly committed to a foundationalist enterprise. Austin's work on speech-act theory and Wittgenstein's observations on language as social pragmatics have some force.<sup>84</sup> In addition, her appropriation of the method of Imre Lakatos contains a certain amount of promise for testing theological research programs.

There are serious problems here, though, and the difficulties seem to far outweigh the value of her approach. Murphy clearly goes to extremes in her critique of foundationalism. This is especially the case in her criticisms of Bloesch and McGrath as "biblical" or "narrative" foundationalists. Murphy contends that those who regard the biblical text as "unchallengeable" have gone too far.<sup>85</sup> Yet she herself gives privileged status to certain scientific theories that she considers to be more valuable than biblical teachings, thus raising the question of whether she herself has foundationalist tendencies: Murphy is completely committed to an evolutionary understanding of the origin and development of living entities in this world. At a time when many scientists are abandoning the theory of evolution and when writers such as Phillip Johnson and Michael Behe have offered salient critiques of the foundations of neo-Darwinism, Murphy is fully committed to defending it and to interpreting the Bible in light of evolutionary theory. For all of her gesturing against foundationalism, it seems clear that Murphy employs a kind

of soft foundationalism. She uses many of the same kinds of arguments as are found in those she critiques, only without the metaphor of construction. Unfortunately, her foundation is not Scriptural interpretation, but science and tradition. This raises the question of whether Murphy's theology is actually a form of liberalism, since classical liberalism sought to subordinate the Bible to models of science and historicism.

It is also clear that Murphy wants to move theology away from the notion that revelation is cognitive, that doctrines are propositional. This is part of her allegation that one need not justify the use of Scripture in theological formation. What she is really saying is that we must read Scripture as narrative and that we do not look for any criteria of verification. Her prescription is clearly at odds with traditional evangelicalism, which makes two theological affirmations that form an indivisible package: (1) Scripture is true; and (2) Christ is humanity's only hope.<sup>86</sup>

At first glance, it seems that Murphy is arguing against giving consideration to prolegomena—a Barthian concern. However, most of her work is in the form of prolegomena. Moreover, she does not simply take commitment to Scripture as analytic, but develops an elaborate theory about how Scripture is to be read and what in Scripture is to be considered as authoritative. There is more than a little double-dealing here.

Her appeals to Lakatos are helpful and this method may offer real help in the construction of models to solve theological difficulties. But there are two qualifications that need to be made with respect to Murphy's use of Lakatos. First, when she argues that the auxiliary hypotheses in support of a hard core allow social sci-

ences, modern culture, and physical science to stand on an equal footing with biblical texts, she is moving away not only from *sola Scriptura*, but even from *suprema Scriptura*. Her claim that the perspicuity of Scripture is no longer a viable doctrine is simply not proven. Most evangelicals are willing to allow some room for the sciences to offer corroboration to the Bible, but they will not allow it to supplant the Bible. Her Lakatosian model does just this.

Second, it is not obvious that Murphy has given us anything radically new. The research program of Lakatos is interesting, and it does make clear just how research can either verify or disprove a proposed theory. It is quite likely, however, that good evangelical theologians have been implicitly employing a similar method for many years. It seems to this reviewer that thinkers such as John Calvin and Millard Erickson employ a kind of Lakatosian model, with the exception that they do not elevate social sciences to the same level as God's Word.

Furthermore, her whole approach stacks the deck in favor of theories that are critical of Scripture's trustworthiness. She disallows the defense of the Bible in matters wherein it can be subject to testing on the allegation that such an approach is degenerative and, therefore, not a viable theological method. "Fundamentalists" with their passion to defend the Bible are by that very fact in violation of sound methodological principles.

For all its promise, for all its help in understanding some of the issues that lie before thinkers in the postmodern world, Murphy's method must be seen as a failure at the end of the day. Her position is, whether she wishes to admit it or not, akin to modernism. This becomes clear when she claims that our understanding of

human personhood (and other theological issues) is not dependent on Scripture, but on modern understanding of psychology. It is also clear when she rejects Scripture as the final Word on all matters theological.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Nancey Murphy, *Reconciling Theology and Science: A Radical Reformation Perspective* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora, 1997) ix-x, 1-5, 19-20.

<sup>2</sup>She often employs the designation, “fundamentalist,” but she generally uses the term to refer to theologians who do not refer to themselves as fundamentalists. This paper will generally use the more neutral designation of “conservative” except when actually quoting Murphy’s own words.

<sup>3</sup>John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1994) 2.

<sup>4</sup>J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 62.

<sup>5</sup>Though such designations are often employed in discussing this issue, they are something of a misnomer. The use of the term “foundationalism” to designate a specific epistemological move is of recent origin. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published in 1967, does not even contain an entry labeled “Foundationalism.” The work of Quine, Toulmin, Kuhn, Rorty, and Austin brought to light a set of concerns that had been under serious discussion for several decades that crystallized around this specific locution. Foundationalism, then, is a concept both old and new. See the discussion of the roots of these shifts in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 3-

120; Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1973) 33-66, 202-262.

<sup>6</sup>Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 5-88.

<sup>7</sup>Specifically, Toulmin contends that the assassination of Henry of Navarre on May 14, 1610 was the event that pushed the young Descartes over the edge and that the war that followed cemented his resolve to find a secure starting point for his system (*Cosmopolis*, 45-62).

<sup>8</sup>Toulmin’s thesis has been remarkably influential among postmodern intellectuals. At the impressionistic level it has a certain cogency. His thesis, however, is anachronistic and based largely on questionable inferences. See further below.

<sup>9</sup>René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. F. F. Sutcliffe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 95. Hegel hailed Descartes for erecting a “metaphysics of understanding” and he believed that he was destined to bring this project to completion (G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson [New York: Humanities, 1968] 3:220-230).

<sup>10</sup>John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1894) 121-123.

<sup>11</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Peers and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961) 1.0.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.0.

<sup>13</sup>Thiel, 6.

<sup>14</sup>There are vast differences in the types of foundationalism found in the Cartesian/Kantian system over against the logical positivist system, since logical

positivism is attempting to limit the sphere of knowledge to that which can be established by physics or mathematics, while the Continental rationalists are attempting to build an indubitable basis for knowledge based on metaphysics. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979) 172-173.

<sup>15</sup>Thiel, 8-10.

<sup>16</sup>One school of interpreting Wittgenstein claims that his later views developed out of his earlier views quite naturally and consistently, not by radical disjuncture (Janik and Toulmin, 229-238). The outcome of this dispute in no way affects the thesis of this argument.

<sup>17</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953) 11-12, 125-140.

<sup>18</sup>Gertrude Ezorsky, "Pragmatic Theory of Truth," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 6:427-430.

<sup>19</sup>Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Science Editions, 1961) 40.

<sup>20</sup>Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997) 9.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Nancey Murphy and James William McClendon, Jr., "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies," *Modern Theology* 5, no. 3 (April 1989) 192.

<sup>23</sup>Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996) 13.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>26</sup>Hodge's connection to Reid and Locke has been examined recently by Peter Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1997).

<sup>27</sup>Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1907) 41, quoted in Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 15.

<sup>28</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 1:11.

<sup>29</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 15.

<sup>30</sup>Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 92.

<sup>31</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 17.

<sup>32</sup>Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 93. Virtually the same statement can be found in Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 17-18.

<sup>33</sup>While Scripture is "without error in its matter, i. e., in its basic teaching and witness," "this does not imply perfect factual accuracy in all details" (Donald Bloesch, *Evangelical Renaissance* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973] 56). He further resists defending a "naive biblical literalism" in which the "credibility of the Bible rests upon the edibility of Jonah" (Donald Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity* [New York: Doubleday, 1983] 119). In the volume on Scripture in his new work on systematic theology, Bloesch articulates a position he calls "derivative inerrancy": "I see the truth of the Bible lying in the revealed mystery of God's self-condescension in Jesus Christ, and by

the inspiring work of the Spirit this truth is reflected in every part of the Bible" (Bloesch, *Holy Scripture, Christian Foundations* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994] 307, n. 21). He rejects as rationalistic the type of inerrancy found in writers such as Henry, Schaeffer, Warfield, and especially Lindsell.

<sup>34</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 19.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>36</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994) 119, quoted in Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 19. (This is a reference to the first edition of McGrath's work.)

<sup>37</sup>McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 119.

<sup>38</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 55.

<sup>39</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 19. She is especially concerned about this passage in McGrath's *Genesis of Doctrine*: "The transition from a narrative to a conceptual framework of thinking would have potentially destructive effects for Christian theology if the narrative concerning Jesus of Nazareth, having been allowed to generate a specific framework of conceptualities, were forgotten" (McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, 64).

<sup>40</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 23.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid. See Shailer Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924).

<sup>42</sup>It is interesting to note that Hans Frei apparently would agree with

Murphy in ascribing a *modern* approach to knowledge claims to both conservatives and liberals. He places Carl Henry and David Tracy in the same camp on this matter of theological method, due to the fact that, in his opinion, each employs Enlightenment epistemological paradigms. Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 24-25. This volume was assembled from lectures given by Frei in 1983 and 1987. See also Hans W. Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" *Trinity Journal* 8 (Spring, 1987) 23-30.

<sup>43</sup>Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 111; idem, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 28-35.

<sup>44</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 29.

<sup>45</sup>Murphy and McClendon, 200.

<sup>46</sup>Murphy, *Reconciling Theology and Science*, xi.

<sup>47</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 105; idem, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 122.

<sup>48</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 104.

<sup>49</sup>Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 120.

<sup>50</sup>Murphy, "Textual Relativism," 268.

<sup>51</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 103.

<sup>52</sup>Murphy, "Textual Relativism," 254.

<sup>53</sup>Nancey Murphy, *Theology in an Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990) 12.

<sup>54</sup>Her thesis here is based on the seminal monograph by Jeffrey Stout, *Flight from Authority* (Notre Dame:

University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

<sup>55</sup>Murphy, *Theology in Age of Scientific Reasoning*, 12.

<sup>56</sup>Some of those in the liberal camp, such as Hegel, rejected Hume's thesis and attempted a reaffirmation of the cognitive element of the faith along historical and even scientific lines. But Hegel has few disciples among theologians in the contemporary world.

<sup>57</sup>Pannenberg's major work in theological method is found in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

<sup>58</sup>Murphy's method is dependent (or appreciative of) on Toulmin's work on the history of foundationalism, found in his work *Cosmopolis*, but she is less sanguine about Toulmin's approach to the history of science. Murphy, *Theology in Age of Scientific Reasoning*, 56-58; see Stephen Toulmin, *Foresight and Understanding* (New York: Harper, 1961) 80-83.

<sup>59</sup>Murphy, *Theology in Age of Scientific Reasoning*, 52-58.

<sup>60</sup>So Alister E. McGrath, *Science and Religion: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999) 71-83.

<sup>61</sup>Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) 92-110, 150.

<sup>62</sup>Murphy, *Theology in Age of Scientific Reasoning*, 12.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 58-79.

<sup>64</sup>Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, ed.

John Worrall and Gregory Currie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 8-101.

<sup>65</sup>"The following essay is written in the conviction that anarchism, while perhaps not the most attractive political philosophy, is certainly excellent medicine for epistemology, and for the philosophy of science" (Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* [London: NLB, 1975] 17).

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>68</sup>Jean-François Lyotard makes many of the same claims in his little book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 23-26, 53-59. For Lyotard, one of the problems with science is its tie to "performativity," that is, to what works and is therefore marketable. He urges rather a commitment to the counter-performative (ibid., 53-57).

<sup>69</sup>She also notes that no one has yet (1990) tried to show the relevance of Feyerabend for theological method (Murphy, *Theology in Age of Scientific Reasoning*, 84).

<sup>70</sup>Murphy, *Theology in Age of Scientific Reasoning*, 92-94.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 89-165. Murphy especially commends the postmodern theologians George Lindbeck and Ronald Thiemann, gives qualified approval to Harvey Cox and Thomas Altizer, but rejects Mark C. Taylor's work on the basis that it is too modern and not really postmodern. Murphy and McClendon, "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies," 205-212.

<sup>72</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 28-32.

<sup>73</sup>Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994).

<sup>74</sup>Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984) 21.

<sup>75</sup>John Searle, *Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) 47-62.

<sup>76</sup>She is not alone in this. A fairly large group of theistic philosophers now advocate a complementarian approach to the relationship between religion and the sciences. "There is a strong prima facie case for re-examining the claimed cognitive content of Christian theology in the light of the new knowledge derivable from the sciences. . . . If such an exercise is not continually undertaken, theology will operate in a cultural ghetto. . . ." Arthur R. Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 6, 7. Murphy regularly cites the work of Peacocke as being consistent with her own, and is engaged in a large project on such issues in collaboration with Peacocke.

<sup>77</sup>Murphy, *Reconciling Theology and Science*, 56-58.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 58-59.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>83</sup>For a contemporary defense of substance dualism from a scientific, philosophical and theological basis, see J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis of Ethics* (Downers Grove:

InterVarsity Press, 2000) 121-230.

<sup>84</sup>See especially the recent volume, William Alston, *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) especially 147-250.

<sup>85</sup>Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 93.

<sup>86</sup>In 1950 Union Theological Seminary sponsored a public discussion between C. H. Dodd and Paul Tillich. The two men discussed the role of historical investigation and biblical scholarship in reference to living faith. Tillich offered that he had been grasped by the power of the new being, to which the New Testament presented an "analogy," but that "faith did not guarantee any historical (i. e., historically reconstructed) picture or ground any historical assertions concerning this or that fact of the historical Jesus" (F. W. Dillistone, *C. H. Dodd: Interpreter of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977] 242). He claimed that this made his faith superior to its alternative, since it required only a "single risk." Dodd rejoined that no risk of faith is possible unless it has a historical ground, for one cannot "move from an inner feeling in the present to any sort of affirmation (via historical inquiry or not) about a past event" (*ibid.*). He agreed that his position entailed a "double risk," but went on to contend that the preliminary historical risk "was really not all that great" (*ibid.*, 243).