



**THE
NATURAL
THEOLOGIAN**

**Essays on Nature and
the Christian Life**

Joel Carini

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*It is not the spiritual that is first
but the natural, and then the spiritual.*

—1 CORINTHIANS 15:46

Read, not to contradict nor to believe, but to weigh and consider.

—FRANCIS BACON

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Introduction

Evangelical theology is shaped by its engagement with the Bible. Arguments begin from biblical passages as their premises. Biblical passages are exegeted down to the accent markings of the original languages, in the original manuscripts.

Some identify this focus on the Bible as a fault. Catholics criticize evangelicals for ignoring the place of church history and church tradition in theology. From academia, evangelical postmodernists criticize evangelicals for ignoring the place that cultural assumptions play in our theological formulations. Historical scholars urge attention to the ancient historical contexts of biblical passages. And many of these groups criticize evangelicals for their failure to reach unanimity in biblical interpretation by operating from the Bible alone.

After a decade in evangelical, Catholic, and secular academic institutions, I have come to a different conclusion about the limitation of Bible-only theology: Evangelicals have neglected the role of natural human knowledge, both empirical and philosophical, in their theology. The fact that reason and experience play a role in theology is the reason for the divergence between different interpretations of Scripture; correctly, but in an unexamined way, thought and experience *are* influencing different theological formulations.

At the same time, the promise of theological convergence would depend on the hard work of philosophy, empirical observation, and modern science. Convergence is not impossible on account of different cultural assumptions; but neither is there a short-cut to convergence by outsourcing judgment to a mag-

isterium, or to the biblical text itself. True knowledge of God and the world is only available by taking the *risk* of thinking.

The Risk of Thinking

And thinking *is* risky. If a young evangelical begins to think, there is no telling where he will end up - a Calvinist, a neo-Anabaptist, Catholic, Orthodox, postmodernist, nihilist, or gender theorist. If *you* allow your thinking to be determined by the outcome of empirical inquiry, you do not know in advance what you will come to think or whether it will be consistent with your religious or ideological presumptions.

This is why Christians invent strategies to eliminate the risk of thinking. We limit our reading to Christian books. We train ourselves and our children in *the* “Christian worldview,” identifying the corrupt, secular assumptions of all other worldviews. In the most theoretically advanced form, Christian presuppositionalists argue that all our thinking should begin with premises distinctive to Reformed, Trinitarian Christian theology. If we do so, we eliminate the risk that some premise will enter in from the outside from secular science, philosophy, or ideology.

In doing so, we make several errors. First, by only starting from the Bible, we diverge from the biblical teaching concerning general revelation, the “book of nature,” and the natural law of God, written on the hearts of men. Second, in doing so, we cease to have anything we can say in favor of Christianity to those who are not already believers in it. Third, we thereby leave unbelievers *with* an excuse before God; they didn’t know, which robs them of responsibility for sin and thereby of their humanity.

Other errors affect Christians particularly. We ourselves become confident that we have all the knowledge sufficient for life and godliness, potentially by the age of 25 (the age one might finish seminary). We do not seek for wisdom, to which experience, gained through age, is essential. We fail to understand other human beings and the world we live in because we refuse to use our God-given natural faculties, including the senses, to observe and understand them.

In making Christianity a set of lenses and concepts that we impose *upon* the world, we implicitly deny that Christian theology is *about* the world. If the claims of Christianity are not falsifiable - which they are not if all thought is to begin from Christian premises - then they are not accountable to how things are. If I speak about an object available to both our senses, you are able to judge whether what I say matches the reality before you. If what I say is not accountable to our experience of reality, then we have to call into question whether it is *about* the world of common experience.

The Theology of Nature

What is the alternative? A Christianity that *might be false*?

Indeed, for in opening up the possibility that Christianity might be false of the world around us, we allow the possibility that we might discover it to be *true*. Christianity might be thinkable not as a presupposition, but as a conclusion of thought.

To make this change in theology, we need two things, acknowledgement of philosophy and experience as sources of theological knowledge, and a doctrine of nature, including human nature.

Periodically, Christian theology has had need of a renewed theology of nature. Famously, it occurred in Emil Brunner's defense of natural theology against Karl Barth's denial.¹ While Barth's reply to Brunner, "Nein!" is certainly more famous, Brunner's cogent argument in "Nature and Grace" was more accurate. At the same time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer made his apology for the category of nature in Protestant theology in his *Ethics*; Brunner and Bonhoeffer's promotion of natural theology and natural law was overshadowed by Barth's prominence in the neo-Orthodox theological movement.

1. Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, "Natural Theology: Comprising Nature and Grace by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply No! by Dr. Karl Barth."

The same happened in Catholic theology in the first decade of the 21st century, as Lawrence Feingold and Steven Long rebutted half a century of Henri De Lubac's *nouvelle théologie*, the Catholic equivalent of neo-Orthodoxy.² While De Lubac attempted to argue that human nature was incomplete without a supernatural relation to God, Feingold and Long reaffirmed the integrity of created nature.

In evangelical theology, Cornelius Van Til played the role of Barth in evangelical theology, denying natural theology a place in Christian thought. His extreme version of Kuyperianism trickled down into evangelicalism through Francis Schaeffer and other advocates of a Christian worldview.³ Christian analytic philosophy, especially in the persons of Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig, can be seen as the late 20th-century rebuttal of presuppositionalism.

However, I encountered a strong Van Tillian presuppositionalism at Westminster Theological Seminary in the 2010s that was unfazed by these various rebuttals. In spite of its distinctiveness and idiosyncrasies, I felt that it was a concentrated dose of the same kind of insular Christian thought that pervaded conservative evangelicalism.

My experience at a more broad-minded Christian institution, Wheaton College, in spite of its wealth of the liberal arts and sciences, did not have the philosophy to ground a humane Christian intellectual life, because of the attraction of its faculty to postmodernism. Both Christian postmodernism and presuppositionalism, in spite of a great difference in spirit, agree in letter that Christianity cannot be known to be objectively true through experience, but is rather a lens through which we view the world.

Therefore, I conclude that another defense of the role of nature and experience in Christian theology is in order. That is what I seek to provide in *The Natural Theologian*.

2. Henri De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*.

3. In other ways, Schaeffer dissented from Van Til, advocating the kind of preparationism I advocate.

Theology from Experience

In this volume, I have compiled a year's worth of my online writing at my Substack by the same title. In some of the essays, I discuss the theory, the theology and philosophy, of a Christian account of nature and an empiricist theological epistemology. In most of the essays, this theory is demonstrated by being put into practice and into conversation with contemporary political, theological, and ecclesial controversy.

My premonition had been that theology that gave place to nature and empirical knowledge would cut a middle way between opposed views or select a slate of theological positions that bridge contemporary theological divides. This can be seen in the range of views I take in political theology, creation and evolution, and the theology of same-sex attraction.

But the question of same-sex attraction is the one that, this year, has exhibited my method most clearly. The lines have been drawn in the theological debate, with one side claiming to be the most biblical, the other to respect people's subjective experience. Over the course of about a dozen essays, I asked the question what conclusion we would come to if we sought objective knowledge from experience. My thinking was also shaped by actual *experiences*, over the course of the year, as I met several Side B, celibate, gay Christian individuals and attended the fabled Revoice conference. I came to conclusions firmly on one side of this debate, yet in terms unique to my natural-theological method.

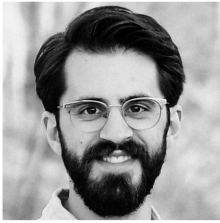
When theology is open to experience, a theologian can be changed. My attendance at Revoice changed me, and the change is evident in the two halves of this volume. I organized the chapters by topic, except for dividing it in half with the section on Revoice as the mid-point. Readers will notice a change in tone. In the first half, I adopted a more combative political posture. I used the word "based" a lot. I advocated some things that I no longer wish to advocate, for example, in the concluding list of recommendations of "Whatever Happened to Reformed Theology?"

My concluding section on evangelicalism shows my transition from a relative defender of the evangelical majority to one more critical of the conservative evangelical subculture.

Such change is relatively uncommon among theologians. They stake out a position and spend a career defending it. But that is what is exciting about doing theology from experience; you don't know how it will turn out, and you don't know how *you* will turn out.

In this volume, I lay out a unique approach to Christian theology and the Christian life. I dare say that almost no one agrees with all of my conclusions. But I warrant that, if you open yourself to experience and the empirical knowledge of nature, you will be challenged, and you will be changed. *Tolle lege!*

About the Author



Joel Carini is a philosopher, theologian, doctoral student at St. Louis University, and writer at *The Natural Theologian*. He began to write online in January 2023, after over a decade of academic writing and study in philosophy and theology. He holds an M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary (PA) and an MA in Philosophy from the University of Chicago and is a doctoral candidate in Philosophy at Saint Louis University. He lives with his wife Anna and three children in St. Charles, Missouri.

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