

Faith in Public

A Response to Greg Dawes¹

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Abstract

In a recent paper, Greg Dawes has argued for what he calls the “presumption of naturalism” in religious studies, and by implication in academia in general. He argues that theological assumptions may not be brought into academic study to the extent that they are not grounded in publicly accessible knowledge. Here I argue that Christians can and must bring their theological assumptions with them into public academia. I will try to show that Dawes’ proposal entails a denial of certain elements of Christian thought, and that his methodology thus fails to be neutral, as well as having other noticeable problems.

Introduction

[1] In a recent paper presented to the religious studies and theology department at the University of Otago and more recently in the *Journal of Religion & Society*, Gregory Dawes has argued for the “presumption of naturalism” in the public study of religion, and by extension, in any kind of study in a public institution. His argument may be briefly summarised as follows:

[2] Faith, according to the Christian tradition (represented here by Aquinas and Calvin), is the gift of God. It is not given to all, and thus it is impossible for all people to share the perspective of faith. God “motivates faith by producing in the individual a desire for God as the first truth” (§9; Dawes is here summarizing Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*). This “faith” is to be distinguished from mere intellectual assent, since the demons “believe” in the sense of “give assent,” yet they do not have this gift of faith. Dawes says that Aquinas saw things believed through faith as not being believed on the merit of any reasons that might be brought forward, but as being known strictly apart from any intellectual process. The effects of faith “are sufficient to move the will but not the intellect.” Dawes sees John Calvin presenting essentially the same view of the attainment of faith. Calvin’s view of Scripture entailed that God attests to the believer that the Bible is indeed God’s word, not via the evidence of miraculous deeds, but via the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.

[3] These accounts of faith, argues Dawes, show that faith is deeply *private*, in that it is not a publicly accessible form of knowledge (if it is really knowledge at all). This is particularly the case in Calvin, where the possibility of having the knowledge that arises through faith is not “open to all,” but is “a gift of God which he bestows on those whom he chooses” (§26). Summing up the problem of faith in public tertiary education, Dawes explains: “The grounds on which things are said to be known by faith are not intersubjectively-accessible,” by which he

¹ I want to thank Gregory Dawes for his comments on an earlier draft on this paper, which proved helpful. I also want to acknowledge Ivor Davidson and Dawes, whose questions and challenges at the presentation of this paper proved provocative as well as useful.

means *publicly* accessible or open to scrutiny by all (§27). Thus, the assumptions of faith cannot properly be employed in the *public* study of religion (or of anything else). Conclusions, if they are to be warranted, must only arise from grounds that are accessible to all.

[4] In addition to the above, Dawes goes on to (very briefly) question “the reliability of faith as a means of accessing reality,” where he suggests that faith should not be viewed as knowledge, or a valid means of attaining knowledge (§27). Those arguments will have to be left to others or for another time, but for now I wish to direct my attention to Dawes’ arguments about the private nature of faith and the necessity of only appealing to *publicly* accessible grounds in the public study of religion. I am aware that there are many other issues than those I will address here, so at the outset I will outline a map of what I intend to cover. First, I will ask whether or not it is entirely fair to talk about religious assumptions as belonging entirely to the realm of esoteric, private, and non-communicable experience, or at any rate if such a characterization is fair to the Christian self-understanding. Second, I will question the notion that “nature” is a brute realm of data on which all people can have shared observation. I will then ask, third, whether it is reasonable to assume that everyone can use methodological naturalism. Fourth, I will ask whether Dawes (or anyone) could conceivably offer us reasons to think that methodological naturalism is a reliable method of discovering truth. Fifth, I will ask if methodological naturalism has some special feature that makes it preferable to any other method of enquiry, and finally suggest a model that could, given Dawes’ criteria of acceptability, serve us at least just as well as methodological naturalism.²

Is the Truth about God Hidden?

[5] Dawes is clearly operating on the view that on the one hand, “faith” is esoteric, operating on knowledge that is secret, making Christianity, ironically, sound like the Gnostic heresies that the church fought so hard against in its early years. Naturalistic facts, on the other hand, have a neutral character. They are evident to all. But what is “faith” here? The material that Dawes himself presents from Aquinas and Calvin shows that in the Christian tradition, “faith” is not merely knowledge of certain theological propositions. Rather, faith is an acceptance of the *truth* of the propositions, and a personal commitment to God (“a desire for God as the first truth”). Thus, it is not the case that Christians operate on premises that cannot be comprehended by all. All can see and understand the premises of a Christian approach to the world, even if they do not accept the truth of these premises or the religious commitment a Christian has. We are reminded, for example, of Anselm’s Ontological argument (while we shrink back from trying to defend him):

The foolish man has said in his heart “There is no God.” But surely that very man, on hearing the term, understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding, even if he does not go on to understand that such a being exists (*Prosogium*, in Smart: 56).

² One question that we could have asked before getting underway is exactly what practical implications Dawes means us to see in his argument. How, in practice, will a person engage public study differently if they freely assume the truth of things believed on the basis of faith than if they only assumed what could be shown via methodological naturalism? Interesting though the question is, Dawes ignored it, and since this is a response to the paper presented by Dawes, we will ignore it.

Christianity might operate on principles that are derived from grounds that not everyone *shares* (in the sense of having shared access to a knowledge of their truth). But this does not mean that it operates on principles that others cannot *understand*. In public study, while we may not share the same position of those we are studying, we are always in a position to take their position as true *for argument's sake*, in order to achieve a sympathetic understanding. And so, while not everyone shares Christian faith, we can still quite happily, as Alvin Plantinga puts it, appeal conditionally to religious convictions. He draws on an American court decision on the teaching of evolution in public schools (*Seagraves v. California*), where the court ruled, “any speculative statements concerning origins, both in texts and in classes, should be presented conditionally, not dogmatically” (Plantinga 2001: 790). While the context Plantinga has in mind is the conduct of a teacher in a public high school class, the principle is easily extrapolated to a public tertiary setting. In such a setting we can easily refrain from appealing to (alleged) knowledge that others cannot share by “conditionalizing” our statements using the word “if.” Dawes himself has done something like this. He has not simply asserted, “In fact the non-believer cannot share the faith that a believer has, because in fact it is the gift of God.” Dawes is not willing to grant, firstly that there is a God, or that God does grant faith as a gift. Instead, Dawes has sought to argue that if faith is in fact the gift of God, then the believer could not reasonably make appeals to knowledge known only based on this gift in public academic discourse. I do not accept the soundness of his argument, but he has shown us a perfectly appropriate way to dialogue between worldviews in public. We are capable of taking as true – for argument's sake – a given worldview, and then asking what would follow from it. This in no way poses a problem for those who do take their own metaphysical worldview for granted when they engage us in public dialogue.

[6] But we can press the issue further: Is the truth about God hidden from all except those to whom God has granted the gift of faith? The Christian answer (or at any rate the answer provided in at least several Christian traditions) is – not at all! This line of reasoning is employed by St. Paul: Nobody has a valid excuse for not knowing the truth about God, since God has made Godself known to all through creation:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since 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 men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:18-21; New International Version).

[7] Now this is not simply a statement of the “teleological argument” – the argument from design. The knowledge posited by Paul is an intuitive knowledge, a knowledge that is formed in the minds of proper functioning persons in response to creation (to use the language of Alvin Plantinga). Thus, if Christianity is true, it is not the case that it operates on esoteric truth claims. Rather, it operates on evident truth claims, claims the truth of which sinful beings have suppressed. This view is clearly present in Calvin, who wrote:

That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from

pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service (1:3:1).

Calvin echoes the thoughts of Paul, arguing that the only reason people do not acknowledge and have faith in God is that they *suppress* the truth that is already evident to them:

The expression of David, (Psalm 14:1, 53:1,) “The fool has said in his heart, There is no God,” is primarily applied to those who, as will shortly farther appear, stifle the light of nature, and intentionally stupefy themselves. We see many, after they have become hardened in a daring course of sin, madly banishing all remembrance of God, though spontaneously suggested to them from within, by natural sense (1:4:2).

If all people were truly rational – if their minds functioned as they ought to and were not darkened by the effects of sin, all people would acknowledge and worship God. Thus, to ask Christians to participate in public discourse on the condition that they abstain from appeals to their knowledge of God is really like asking a person to engage in discussion with a room full of people with blindfolds on, and not base her claims on her visual observation of the physical world!

[8] Perhaps an analogy from physical disabilities will clarify further. There are some people who cannot see, and others who cannot hear. Things are there to be seen and heard, but these people do not apprehend these things by sight and hearing. The fact that some people are simply *unable* to apprehend certain truths through the senses does not in itself entail that we *ought not* to appeal to truths that these people cannot know in their limited state of perception. Similarly, the Christian might argue, the fact that non-believers do not apprehend the truth about God from what God has created is not good grounds for only appealing to truths that can be demonstrated to them in their limited state of perception. This invites a somewhat offended response. Surely I am being condescending, speaking about non-Christian people as spiritually “blind,” saying that they lack perception. And to be quite honest, this is precisely what I *am* saying.³ However, to deny these things is to say that Christianity is untrue, since these are all fundamental elements of Christian theology (or at any rate, a dominant school of thought in Christian theology). Such a move is not simply a presumption of naturalism. To ask Christians not to proceed in this way is to ask them to behave as though their faith is in fact false and thus to exclude them from the very discourse that (in Dawes’ argument) is meant to be inclusive.⁴

[9] Before moving on, we should deal with a possible objection. On the one hand, I am drawing on a biblical and theological conviction that all people know that God is real (and yet suppress the truth about him), and on the other hand, I am referring to people being blind and apparently

³ Although it needs to be said that I am not attributing a greater wisdom or discernment to Christians by virtue of the fact that they *do* perceive what others ought to perceive. On the contrary, as Dawes has noted, faith is the gift of God, so that “no-one can boast” (Ephesians 2:9).

⁴ Dawes might object that they are not actually *excluded*, as long as they do not make appeals to what they think of as their knowledge obtained through faith, but this would be comparable to saying that a gagged man is not excluded from taking part in a conversation!

unable to know the truth about God. Surely, I cannot have it both ways.⁵ But in reality, I am not trying to have it both ways. I am not saying that all people know God *and in the same sense and at the same time* some people do not know God. This would be a very simple contradiction. At this point it would be useful to make explicit the distinction between first order and second order beliefs. First order beliefs take the form “X is the case” (or for our context, “theism is true”). Second order beliefs, on the other hand, are beliefs about our first order beliefs. These take the form, “It is the case that I believe that X is the case” (or, “It is the case that I accept theism”). It is quite conceivable and in no sense contradictory to have a first order belief that God is real, and a second order belief that we do not believe God is real. That is precisely what self-deception entails. Reformed apologist Greg Bahnsen elucidates, in reference to the comments of Paul cited above:

Paul asserts that all men know God so inescapably and clearly from natural revelation that they are left with no defense for their unfaithful response to the truth about Him. In verses 19-20, Paul says “what can be known about God is plain within them because God made it plain to them . . . [being] clearly perceived from the created world, being intellectually apprehended from the things that have been made . . . so that they are without excuse.” Nevertheless, even as they are categorically depicted as “knowing God” (v. 21), all men are portrayed in their unrighteousness as “holding down the truth” (v. 18). They are suppressing what God has already successfully shown them about Himself. As a result of hiding the truth from themselves, unbelievers neither glorify nor thank God, but instead become futile in their reasoning, undiscerning in their darkened hearts, and foolish in the midst of their professions of wisdom (vv. 21-22). According to God’s word through Paul, then, unbelievers suppress what they very well know, confirming what Jeremiah the prophet so aptly declared, “The heart is deceitful above all things” (17:9) (1).

Thus, there is no contradiction in referring to people who know that God exists, and who are (through self-deception) blind to the truth about God.

Is Nature Neutral?

[10] The idea that methodological naturalism (setting aside for now the question of its reliability) enables public discourse to take place makes a clear assumption: When a committed Christian and a committed atheist (or anyone else for that matter) observe the world, they are observing the same thing,⁶ and they find the same *meaning* in what they see (thus providing a common reference point for discourse). They have *shared* observations of what they see. The bare, natural, uninterpreted facts are simply “brute” in nature. Over and against such an outlook, the figurehead of presuppositional apologetics in the twentieth century, Cornelius Van Til, explains the basic approach taken in this school of apologetics, which denies that believers and non-believers share neutral observations of reality:

⁵ Dawes raised this objection after looking over an earlier draft of this paper.

⁶ I do not merely mean that Dawes assumes that the Christian and the atheist are seeing the same objects, for very few would deny this. I mean that he seems to assume that Christians and atheists will more or less affix all the same attributes to what they are seeing.

The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to “facts” or “laws” whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties to the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference-point required to make the “facts” and “laws” intelligible. The question is as to what the “facts” and “laws” really are. Are they what the non-Christian methodology assumes they are? Are they what the Christian theistic methodology presupposes they are?

The answer to this question cannot finally be settled by any direct discussion of “facts.” It must, in the last analysis, be settled indirectly. The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument’s sake, in order to show him that on such a position the “facts” are not facts and the “laws” are not laws. He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument’s sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do “facts” and “laws” appear intelligible (117).⁷

Are believers and non-believers talking about the same thing when they talk about nature?⁸ If methodological naturalism is construed in such a way as to refer to “public” truth as “secular,” with no theological assumptions, then the answer must be no. Christians (in general, but I will represent Reformed Christians in this context) do not see themselves as holding to secular as well as religious beliefs. On the contrary, all areas of belief are essentially theological. This is due to the concept of a Christian worldview. In one sense, a worldview is simplistically the “set of beliefs about the most important issues of life” (Nash: 16). It is an “overall perspective on life, that sums up what we know about the world, how we evaluate it emotionally, and how we respond to it volitionally” (Makkreel: 204). However, it is more than just a list of beliefs or conclusions. It is, to use a metaphor, the “eyeglasses” through which a person sees the world (Nash: 17).

[11] The kind of epistemology that prevails in Reformed Christianity is a kind of *foundationalism*. A brief explanation is required for those not familiar with epistemological models. In foundationalism, while many beliefs are based on evidence or on other beliefs, there is a kind of belief that is not – a foundational or basic belief. Aristotle gave the classic rationale for this in his *Posterior Analysis*: If all knowledge is *inferential*, that is, a belief B1 must be inferred from other known beliefs such as B2, then we must ask how B2 is justified. If *all* knowledge is inferential, then B2 must be inferred from B3, which in turn is based on B4 and so on *ad infinitum*. But surely this is impossible, for it would require that a person hold to an infinite number of justifying beliefs for any given belief that they hold. Thus, there must be a certain kind of basic belief that is *not* inferred from other beliefs (Moser: 278). For the Christian

⁷ While I make this citation to highlight the difficulty of assuming that the natural world yields a brute or neutral reading that we can all come to, Van Til’s comments here are the springboard into what is referred to as the *Transcendental* argument for the existence of God, which seeks to argue that even non-believers presuppose God’s reality when engaging in the scientific, logical, or ethical enterprise. A detailed examination of this argument will have to wait for another occasion.

⁸ I am assuming that they are talking about the same thing ontologically. The question here is whether they are talking about the thing with all the same predicates.

worldview, the most foundational of all beliefs is that the Christian God exists. This belief gives rise to other beliefs, as William Lane Craig explains with regard to moral beliefs in particular:

[I]f God exists, objective moral values exist. To say that there are objective moral values is to say that something is right or wrong independently of whether anybody believes it to be so. It is to say, for example, that Nazi anti-Semitism was morally wrong, even though the Nazis who carried out the Holocaust thought that it was good; and it would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or brainwashing everybody who disagreed with them.

On the theistic view, objective moral values are rooted in God. God's own holy and perfectly good nature supplies the absolute standard against which all actions and decisions are measured. God's moral nature is what Plato called the "Good." He is the locus and source of moral value. He is by nature loving, generous, just, faithful, kind, and so forth.

Clearly, this commentary does not apply to just *any* theism. It may be, for example, that I am a member of a religion that worships an angry demon who eats babies for breakfast and delights in causing suffering. A worshipper of such a deity will have different religious moral demands made of her. The point, however, is that if a person's beliefs about their God are at the foundation of all their other beliefs and values (as is the case with Reformed Christians), then their moral convictions, beliefs, and ways of looking at the world (i.e. their worldview) will be framed accordingly. If one is a Christian, then all aspects of one's worldview will arise in this context. Since all beliefs that we hold belong to our worldview (by definition), then there is a connection (albeit a complex one at times) between each of our beliefs and the foundation of our worldview, provided we are thinking consistently.

[12] It should be clear that one's worldview will control the way one is *able* to understand the evidential data in the natural world, but an example should make this clearer still. Alvin Plantinga uses the issue of Darwinian evolution to make the point. It will be clear from the way I am using this illustration that the *truth* of evolution has nothing to do with the point I am making. Surveying the literature, Plantinga notes the overwhelming certainty of Richard Dawkins, Stephen Gould, William Provine and others, who unite in declaring that evolution is not simply a theory, but an established fact. Why is there such certainty?

Given the spotty character of the evidence – for example, a fossil record displaying sudden appearance and subsequent stasis and few if any genuine examples of macroevolution, no satisfactory account of a mechanism by which the whole process could have happened, and the like – these claims of certainty seem at best wildly excessive. The answer can be seen, I think, when we realize that what you properly think about these claims of certainty depends in part on how you think about theism. If you reject theism in favor of naturalism, this evolutionary story is the only game in town, the only visible answer to the question: Where did all this enormous variety of flora and fauna come from? How did it all get here? Even if the fossil record is at best spotty and at worst disconfirming, this story is the only answer on offer (from a naturalistic perspective) to these questions.

From a theistic or Christian perspective, however, things are much less frantic. The theist knows that God created the heavens and the earth and all that they contain; she knows, therefore, that in one way or another God has created all the vast diversity of contemporary plant and animal life. But of course she isn't thereby committed to any particular way in which God did this. He could have done it by broadly evolutionary means; but on the other hand he could have done it in some totally different way (1997).

My point is not that evolution is false or anything of the sort. My point is simply to draw attention to the obvious problem of assuming that "natural" evidence will demonstrate the same thing to one person that it demonstrates to another. The reality is that the worldview of the observer will control and limit the possible ways of interpreting the natural world.

Can Everyone Use Methodological Naturalism?

[13] Naturalism proper, or *ontological* naturalism, is the view expressed in Carl Sagan's oft-cited maxim, "The universe is all there is, all there ever has been, and all there ever will be." But clearly not everyone can presume this to be true. What Dawes has advocated is a much more toned down proposal: that people only appeal to truths gained by the naturalistic method – *methodological* naturalism. In this approach, methods of investigation and demonstration are carried out *as though* ontological naturalism were true, but one need not actually hold ontological naturalism. The only kinds of premises or evidence claims that can be allowed are ones that an ontological naturalist could employ.

[14] But what does naturalism examine? The universe and all it contains? Which universe? The universe that Christians believe exists? The universe that atheists believe exists? If we say that the two universes are one and the same (and I think we must, unless we think that we are all literally living in different universes!), we run into the problem highlighted earlier – we cannot simply assume that Christians and atheists are seeing the same thing when they look at the universe. What are we to do? The distinct impression one gets from reading Dr Dawes' paper is that in public dialogue we should refer to the universe *as an ontological naturalist would view it*. When we look at the universe as such, we cannot say that we are looking at "creation," even if that is what we believe we can see. Given such a methodology, it is clearly not inclusive or neutral. Christians are being asked to assume that the universe is "naturalistic" for the sake of public discourse (although they are not required to believe this). While it seems like a common sense suggestion to me that when engaging in science or scholarship in general, we should bring all that we know (or at least all that we think we know) to bear on the enquiry, the only people who are allowed to do this in Dawes' proposal are those with no theistic beliefs.

Is Methodological Naturalism Reliable?

[15] A question of obvious importance is whether or not methodological naturalism yields reliable conclusions. If it does not, then I submit that it should not be the preferred methodology in a "publicly recognised discipline" as Dawes puts it. It is at this point that I must break away from the theologian's mould and play the philosopher. For those unfamiliar with the distinction between internalist and externalist views of knowledge, a brief explanation is required. Generally speaking, it is accepted that knowledge is warranted true belief. For example, if I randomly guess (or if I was banged on the head, and suddenly concluded) that there are four hundred trillion stars in the universe, and my guess is correct, I do not actually *know* that there are that many, even

though my guess is true. My belief is true, but not *warranted* – I pulled it out of a hat, or my belief arose through brain injury, so it is not knowledge. Internalism and externalism are two different views about justification or warrant of knowledge. In internalism, a believer in some proposition *p* must know how *p* is warranted, or at least have some good reason to think that *p* is warranted, in order to really know *p*. In externalism, however, a believer in *p* does not need to be able to show that *p* is justified or to know that *p* is warranted or how it is warranted, in order to know *p*. Instead, *p* simply has to be warranted.⁹ A concrete example will be useful. As a general rule, we trust our five senses. If I see a book sitting on the table, and I pick it up, turn it over in my hands, flip through the pages, and then place it back down on the table, (and provided I have no reason to think I am sick or mentally dysfunctional), it is reasonable to say, “I know that there is a book on the table.” The externalist says that as long as there really is a book on the table, and provided sense perception is a sufficient warrant, then I am justified in making this knowledge claim. However, an internalist approach would be to say that as long as there really is a book on the table, and provided I have good reasons for thinking that sense perception is a sufficient warrant, then I am justified in making this knowledge claim. On reflection, this has considerable problems, because we could never show that our senses are a sufficient warrant in a non-circular way. Any evidence I might produce would be evidence that I gained via my senses, and in order for me to show it to you, you would need to use your senses. We cannot show that our senses are reliable, and thus in order to know that the book is on the table, our senses must simply be reliable, and the book must be there. Because of problems like this, I submit that externalism has more going for it as a viable epistemology.

[16] On what view of knowledge is Dawes operating? Rather than just ask him, I have chosen to project and speculate, in order to investigate what would follow from either option. The two options are mutually exclusive and therefore cover all possibilities, and thus Dawes must be arguing from one or the other (or not intentionally from either, in which case his own argument will now be clarified). On the face of it, it looks like Dawes has assumed an internalist stance. He has asserted that religious views cannot be recognised in public academic discourse *to the extent that the believer cannot show how they are warranted*, since their warrant is private, existential, and not communicable.¹⁰ The principle being advanced then is that a claim cannot be accepted in public academic discourse if the believer cannot show that it is warranted. Here is where the circularity becomes apparent: This principle would require that we show claims arrived at via methodological naturalism to be warranted. But if we are to demonstrate this in public academic discourse, then Dawes has told us we must use methodological naturalism to demonstrate the truth of the claim “methodological naturalism is warranted,” and the circular methodology arises. And so I submit that to employ an internalist view of knowledge could not serve Dawes’ argument.¹¹

⁹ As Paul K. Moser puts it, in internalism, the “justificational support” for any given belief must be “accessible” and therefore communicable/demonstrable to others, while externalism rejects this “accessibility requirement” (237).

¹⁰ For this reason we could in fact call Dawes’ position *strong internalism*, since he seems to be arguing that the believer must not simply know that her faith *is* warranted, but in fact be able to *convey* that fact via methodological naturalism before we can all accept that she knows what she claims to know.

¹¹ I would suggest another problem with such an internalism approach (although it is already fairly apparent). If we say that we know and can show that a belief reached via methodological naturalism is warranted (let us call that belief *b*), and we hold to an internalist view of knowledge, we would then be obliged to show that our belief that *b* is

[17] This leaves us with externalism. Dawes could (and I submit that he *should*) say that he does not have to be able to demonstrate how claims reached via methodological naturalism are warranted in order to really know them. They simply have to be warranted. For example, let us say that people learned that the earth is a sphere via methodological naturalism (setting aside for now the problem of whether that is possible). Provided methodological naturalism is reliable, and provided the earth really is a sphere, then we can say that we know the earth is spherical. What is important to note, however, is that such a move would rob Dawes of his objection to the appeal to religious convictions in public academia, since he would no longer be in a position to tell believers that they must be able to demonstrate via methodological naturalism how their beliefs are warranted. In order to continue excluding appeals to religious belief from public academic discourse, he would have to say that they are in fact not warranted, entailing that God has in fact not granted faith to them (with either because God does not exist, or because God has not decided to grant faith, or for some other reason), which is not something his thesis is willing to do, given its avoidance of making any ontological claims. Thus, I submit that to argue in such a way as to cogently say that methodological naturalism is reliable would be to remove Dawes' objection to the appeal to religious convictions.

Why Methodological Naturalism?

[18] Because I am a Christian, I, like Calvin and Aquinas, make the claim that "I know Christianity to be true." Thus, I will employ a methodology that presupposes the truth of Christianity. Although I have briefly stated the reason in passing, I want to now more closely examine the reason for adopting methodological naturalism. Does Dawes suggest that we should adopt the method because it yields true conclusions? In fact he does not (or at least if he privately thinks this he does not say so in his paper). Rather, the reason for adopting ("presuming," as Dawes puts it) naturalism is that all people can do so. I have already suggested that this is actually untrue due to the various different worldview structures that people see facts in light of, so I think that the primary reason for adopting methodological naturalism fails. But in academia, should not there be another reason for adopting methodologies? Are not we supposed to employ methodologies because they yield truth? If not, why employ them? We might be able to come up with a methodology that enables the maximum number of people to join the academic game as it were, and they might all end up wrong on account of using this methodology.

[19] I have suggested that there are some problems with Dawes' suggestion that we must, in public discourse, only make appeals to beliefs that can be demonstrated to others using methodological naturalism. I have also given what I think is a sufficient reason not to put confidence in the conclusions that we might arrive at if we abide by this suggestion. But let us momentarily grant his position for argument's sake. Let us say that we must adopt a methodology, a convention that everyone can take part in, in order to not exclude people from public discourse. It seems obvious that methodological naturalism is not the only option available to us. All we really need is a method that students in general are able to take part in. It must be a method that has data that can be observed by all, and which can produce conclusions that can then be tested by all against this data.

warranted is itself warranted. We would then have to show that our belief that the belief that *b* is warranted, is warranted, and so on *ad infinitum*.

[20] Christians can play the same game that Dawes has engaged in. Let us suggest an alternative to methodological naturalism. In public discourse, in order to provide a common methodology and to enable maximal participation, we ought to employ *methodological Christianity*. That is to say, we ought to proceed in our method of analysis and demonstration as we would if the Trinitarian God existed and the Bible were the word of this God, that Jesus was Lord and so forth. A cry might go up, “but not everyone is a Christian.” But bear in mind that I am not asking people to accept ontological Christianity, only methodological Christianity. In fact, that this objection seems so likely to arise suggests to me that most of us have an intuitive notion that we should only employ “methodological Q” if “ontological Q” is true. Unless Dawes would deem it just as legitimate to use “methodological Christianity” as it is to use “methodological naturalism,” then it looks very much as though Dawes has chosen methodological naturalism because he thinks naturalism proper is true.

Conclusion

[21] In arguing that all should presume naturalism, Dawes has presupposed that Christian beliefs constitute secretive knowledge, and that all have the same view of what nature is. This is simply not true. His approach has presupposed a denial of important Christian beliefs (e.g. the noetic effects of sin, the universal knowledge of God). He has also presupposed that a naturalistic approach is common ground, when, if the Reformed tradition is right, believers and non-believers see nature itself in very different ways.¹² This means, among other things, that not everyone can employ the method of investigation that Dawes suggests as a “public” method and actually communicate on common ground. The assumption that methodological naturalism is reliable is also not without some problems for Dawes’ argument. To make this assumption seems to require an externalist view of knowledge (or at least I have argued that this is far less problematic than the alternative), which would actually free religious people from the requirement of having to demonstrate the existence and reliability of the warrant for their beliefs. Finally, since the methodological naturalism in Dawes’ approach is merely a convention, and it is certainly not the only possible method if co-operation rather than truth is our goal, then a Christian methodology – even if Christianity is false – would serve this end equally well.

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¹² It should be clear by now that it is actually irrelevant whether or not the Reformed tradition (or the broader Christian tradition) is *correct* (although I think it is). My point is that Dawes has not really offered a view that enables *public* discourse because it excludes this group of people.

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