

**Randal Rauser**

*Theology in Search of Foundations.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009.

272 pages

US\$100.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-921460-0)

This book addresses both theologians and philosophers. To the latter, it presents a part of recent discussions in epistemic justification, especially the debate about foundationalism. To the former, it shows how theologians adapted their perspective on religious discourse to make it fit what they thought of as epistemological requirements coming from recent philosophical theories. Theologians took too seriously the philosophical critique of theological foundationalism; and finally they played the role of ‘gravediggers’ (8) to theology.

The book begins with a chapter on Descartes, Locke, and Kant about ‘the Crisis of Justification’. These three philosophers, Rauser says, ‘sought to re-establish theology in light of fracturing authorities—and inadvertently ended up as theology’s gravediggers.’ (3) Rauser’s claim about these philosophers is disputable. Descartes says certain things about theology and its relation to philosophy; but this is certainly not his main preoccupation, and what Descartes actually had to say about theology is not examined in Rauser’s book. The same is true concerning Locke, but to a lesser extent; for *The Reasonableness of Christianity* is at least quoted, even if it is not seriously examined. And a similar comment applies also to Rauser’s treatment of Kant. Kant certainly wrote on religious matters, but Rauser does not report Kant’s actual thoughts about religion, providing the reader only with a few clichés. Rauser is simply wrong to think that we must guess the theological position of these thinkers from texts that they wrote about other matters. This methodology is quite strange.

In fact, Rauser’s thesis that these three philosophers are gravediggers for the theological enterprise is based on very fragile historical evidence. ‘Traditionally, theology has been concerned with the development and defense of doctrines and the theoretical frameworks by which we understand them’ (26), Rauser says. But, in the wake of our three great philosophers, the assumption is made ‘that theology can only be justified as a public-knowledge discourse if one can offer adequate evidence for it’ (26). This is represented by Rauser as the modern view, overlooking Peter Abelard, John Duns Scotus and other medieval philosophers who argued for the same thing. Evidently, historical accuracy is not one of Rauser’s main concerns. And he has not patiently examined the work of Descartes, Locke and Kant, but has instead used second-hand sources to support the ‘gravedigger’ metaphor of which he is so fond.

When classical foundationalism—the evidentialist project to ground knowledge—

collapsed, theology fell into the grave philosophers had dug for it. Speaking from the depths of the sepulchre, as it were, Rauser examines the situation of ‘philosophy and theology after foundationalism’, and focuses on the various non-foundationalist attempts to climb out of the pit (Chapter 5). This is an ambitious program that can hardly be achieved—indeed, it can hardly even be begun—simply by examining the samples considered by Rauser. He speaks of ‘non-foundationalism’, but no clear account of this notion emerges. He tells us that ‘the flexibility of the term non-foundationalism becomes evident when one considers the broad range of philosophers who have been identified as non-foundationalist, including Charles Peirce, John Dewey, William James, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Wilfrid Sellars, W. V. O. Quine, Donald Davidson, Jacques Derrida, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Rorty’ (108). The term ‘non-foundationalism’ must be very flexible indeed to apply to all the philosophers in this list! Peircian non-foundationalism (if it exists) is clearly not of the same nature as Heidegger’s or Putnam’s (and we must of course pay attention to just which Putnam we have in mind). It is true, as Rauser says, that the term ‘non-foundationalism’ is used broadly and flexibly, but he does not seem to appreciate that, for that very reason, the term must be constrained by context, if it is to be of any use at all. Rauser employs the term too liberally for it to be methodologically useful. Perhaps it would have been possible to introduce an analytical classification of the many foundationalisms and non-foundationalisms that would have furthered Rauser’s purposes, but he makes no efforts in that direction.

With Chapter 6 begins the de(con)struction of the de(con)struction of the theological edifice of modern times, with tentative answers to questions like, ‘Doesn’t truth matter?’ (140) or, ‘Is everything open to revision?’ (159). The defense of a critical realism is thereby set in motion. Rauser here considers Bruce Marshall’s *Trinity and Truth*, a defense of a non-foundationalist account of Trinity (surprisingly perhaps, a Davidsonian account). This part of Rauser’s book, about Trinity, seems to me more robust than the historical retrospective with which the book begins. I also think that Marshall’s theory, even if in the end it is subject to criticism, furnishes better material for discussion than the uncertain historical panorama Rauser presents in the earlier part of his book. ‘Marshall analyses the distorting procedure of modern theologians as being dependent upon a critical premise that meaning can be separated from truth, as if we can decide the meaning of a statement prior to deciding upon its truth,’ Rauser tells us (173). But his commentary on Marshall’s position is overall rather opaque, because of an annoying tendency to advance theses without supporting arguments to back them up. At best, we receive only very incomplete arguments. We are given a portrait of Marshall’s analysis (and of Davidson’s ideas about truth), but it is not easy to grasp the reasons that ostensibly justify what Rauser calls ‘a refreshing approach toward unapologetic theology, with a robust pay-off’ (192).

Chapter 7 criticizes this ‘refreshing approach’. First, Rauser claims that Marshall’s idea that truth consists of Christic self-presentation is quite obscure; he also

criticizes Marshall's internalist, deontological, and quasi-voluntarist account of justification. He rejects the 'linguistic thesis' that non-foundationalists assume (that is, according to him). Finally he claims: 'after this four-chapter survey of major non-foundationalist proposals, it is beginning to appear that our best hope may be a return to the as-yet still unfashionable precincts of foundationalism' (223).

The foundationalism he has in mind is drawn from Alvin Plantinga, and Plantinga's account of epistemic justification is therefore quoted and paraphrased extensively. Rauser also appeals to Reidian common-sense realism, to particularism (against 'methodism' in epistemology, as Roderick Chisholm would have said), and to fallibilism. Through these paths we are finally led to the question: 'If it is possible to have properly basic beliefs, might theological beliefs be among them?' (231). The intended answer is obviously 'yes'. Faith—and Rauser has in mind specifically Christian faith—is a form of knowledge. It is not a purely internal knowledge, completely inaccessible to non-Christians who do not share Christian basic beliefs; for new evidence could provide a *defeater* for Christian belief, or so Plantinga has maintained. (For this reason, Plantinga has had to fight against what appeared as the main defeater: the evident fact of evil in a world purportedly created by an almighty, omniscient and absolutely good God.) 'The foundationalist grounds understanding in an intrinsic link between the world (properties) and mind (concepts), so that simple perception of the properties of concrete particulars naturally give rise to mental concepts,' Rauser says (240). And he directs us to the famous passage in Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*, where Plantinga asserts that 'what you properly take to be rational, at least in the sense of warranted, depends on what sort of metaphysical and religious stance you adopt. It depends on what kind of beings you think human beings are, what sorts of beliefs you think their noetic faculties will produce when they are functioning properly, and which of their faculties or cognitive mechanisms are aimed at the truth' (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, 245). Rauser states approvingly: 'In effect, the masters of suspicion have long dominated the discussion by making judgments of Christian belief relative to their presuppositions' (246). But is this a sufficient comment on Plantinga's very strong claim? Not only does Rauser content himself far too much with quoting or paraphrasing Plantinga; what he recounts are only Plantinga's conclusions; evidently he considers Plantinga's arguments to be of little interest.

The final chapter of Rauser's book is titled 'Theology as Foundational and Analytic'. It defends the project of a 'rigorous and committed theology' (284). That is presumably just what we are hoping for, and the book suggests that it may be possible to realize it. But Rauser seems to think that to demonstrate this possibility, it suffices merely to quote at length from various recent books. Far too many pages in Rauser's book are little more than lists of proper names; and within the morass of name-dropping, Rauser jumps, almost at random, from one author to another. There is, in short, no sustained, coherent argument. Sometimes it seems that we are being presented simply with Rauser's reading notes and his reactions to whatever books he has read—or even to

books quoted in books he has read. Rauser says: ‘One of [the] primary goals in this book has been to lay an epistemological foundation for the rather old-fashioned doctrinal realism that understands doctrines to be cognitive and propositional’ (269). That is indeed a very fine project, but it is not realized in this volume.

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