



The SST alliance: Public theology, scientific reasoning, and skeptical inquiry in a post-truth age

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Abstract: This article argues that the Christian public theologian engages the wider culture in rational discourse regarding truth versus falsity, information versus disinformation, and the common good over division. In the global struggle to base public policy on accuracy, the public theologian could make a positive contribution by partaking in an alliance made up of Science, Skepticism, and Theology (SST). This SST Alliance should lift up a shared vision of the common good. Through discourse clarification and worldview construction, the theologian should critique both ideological scientism and materialist skepticism for going too far. What is most valuable to the wider culture is the methodological commitment of both science and skepticism to evidence-based reasoning, something the public theologian endorses. Ultimately, by advocating for this interdisciplinary collaboration, this study demonstrates that theology serves as a vital, rational partner in the urgent global quest to combat the proliferation of misinformation and restore the integrity of objective truth in the public square.

Keywords: evidence-based reasoning, public theology, science, skepticism, SST Alliance

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1. Introduction

Today's social media reverberates with kerfuffle after kerfuffle. One often reiterated averment is this: religion is irrational. Science is rational. Skepticism is rational. Nevertheless, religion is irrational, and when we become educated, we will jettison our religion and replace it with a secular worldview constructed by science, capped by skepticism. Is it true that religion is irrational? How should the public theologian who speaks for religion respond? Rationally?

The thesis of this article has to do with the task of the public theologian. More specifically, *public systematic theology* or *public constructive theology*. When theology becomes public, the theologian must share with the wider culture, beyond the church,

a horizon of understanding, replete with canons of reason that make for shared sense. This includes secular science and, even more, secular skepticism.

Our guiding question in this article is this: How can public theology constructively ally with science and even skepticism in responding to the global truth crisis? Our answer will be this: the public theologian should reaffirm evidence-based reasoning for setting public policy and urge a moral commitment to truth. This mission would lead to an SST alliance between science, skepticism, and theology.

Two tools in the public theologian's apparatus will lead us through this research agenda: discourse clarification and worldview construction. Via discourse clarification, we will analyze the essentials of reasoning as we find them in science, skepticism, and theology. Via worldview construction, we will attempt to draw a picture of reality that can be best understood only when all things are oriented toward the one God of grace. We will find that the reverence for sound reasoning within theology offers a partnering affinity with sound reasoning within both scientific research and methodological skepticism.

This is pertinent right now because of a worldwide crisis over truth. Social media has engulfed us with misinformation, disinformation, false facts, deep fake photos, and vile insults. For the sake of the common good, religious communities should ally with scientists and skeptics in an attempt to reestablish evidence-based reasoning as the medium of public discourse.

2. Research Methods

Even though the gospel of Jesus Christ has been shepherded through the centuries solely by the Christian community, its truth applies to the whole of reality and is intended to be a gift to the whole of humanity. Within the Christian tradition, theologians provide reflection on the biblical symbols that enrich our prayer, worship, pastoral care, and mission. However, we ask: what about the value of theology outside the church?

We find ourselves today in a global context rife not only with a plurality of cultural identities but also with division, antagonism, and enmity. Our various societies have lost a consensus on what constitutes the common good and how we can reason our way to cooperation, community, and care. Might the theological wisdom born in the church offer something of value to the culture beyond the church? Might the church theologian become a public theologian?

Public theology is systematic theology or constructive theology pressed into the service of discourse clarification and worldview construction aimed at the wider culture beyond the church.¹ "Public theology is conceived in the church, reflected on

¹ Ted Peters, "From Athens to Jerusalem: Introducing Public Theology," *Public Theology*, June 4, 2023, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/publictheology/2021/09/from-athens-to-jerusalem-introducing-public-theology>.

critically in the academy, and offered to the wider culture for the sake of the common good.”²

What Christian theologians have learned from Holy Scripture, along with the simple absorption of shared wisdom regarding human nature, will be of particular value to persons of goodwill trying to establish and maintain sustainability, peace, and justice. What our world leaders require to provide enlightened direction to social change is a vision of the common good that intuitively communicates transparent truth and a just share in what is good. Korean public theologian Paul Chung puts it this way: “In a nutshell, public theology (*theologia publica*) is concerned with the public affairs or institutions of society (*res publica*) to promote the common good of society.”³

The two tools most ready-to-hand for the public theologian are discourse clarification and worldview construction. First, discourse clarification.⁴ Drawing from the well of inherited theological wisdom, especially regarding human nature, with a focus on the dignity ceded to us by the imago Dei, combined with our expectation of human limits ceded to us by the doctrine of original sin, the theologian is well equipped to clarify public discourse when it becomes unrealistic. South African public theologian Ernst Conradie refers to Christian doctrine as a “toolkit” for repairing public discourse. Our “theological toolkit can help to diagnose what has ultimately gone wrong with the world.”⁵

² See: Ted Peters, “Public Theology: Its Pastoral, Apologetic, Scientific, Political, and Prophetic Tasks,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 12, no. 2 (July 2018): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341533>. According to my Berkeley colleague, Valerie Miles-Tribble, “Public theology can be understood as a pragmatic praxis component of practical theology. Practical theology concerns itself with faith in praxis that cannot be isolated from addressing matters in society at large.... As such, public theology is not politics, but by necessity speaks and acts with full awareness of political dynamics that rend chasms in the human landscape rather than forging equitable bonds of unity. An overarching aim of public theology, therefore, is to assess theoethical implications of Empire with public relevance for all humanity.” Valerie Miles-Tribble, “Restorative Justice as a Public Theology Imperative,” *Review & Expositor* 114, no. 3 (August 2017): 366–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637317721704>.

³ Paul S. Chung, *Public Theology and Civil Society: Constructive Formation* (Madrid: EBL Books, 2022), 11. How should we define the common good? Pope Benedict XVI provides what we need. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of “all of us”, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the *common good* and strive towards it is a *requirement of justice and charity*. See: Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, “Caritas in Veritate,” The HOLY SEE, Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, June 29, 2009, 7, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.

⁴ Ted Peters, “Public Theology, Discourse Clarification, and Worldview Construction,” *Theology and Science* 19, no. 1 (January 2021): 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2020.1869672>.

⁵ Ernst M. Conradie, *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene: What’s Wrong with the World?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), ix.

Quite specifically, the public theologian should clarify the distinction between methodological naturalism and ideological naturalism. What the wider society wants and deserves from both scientists and skeptics is evidence-based reasoning guided by a moral commitment to truth. What the wider culture does not need from scientists or skeptics is a materialist worldview that sidelines consciousness, spirit, and moral valuing.

Second, worldview construction.⁶ One cannot truly understand reality without recognizing how all that exists is the gift of a divine creator who has designs on redemption. To perceive the creation in secular fashion as a stand-alone reality apart from its giftedness by a gracious creator and redeemer is to live in the shadow rather than the light. This means the theologian is enjoined by biblical revelation to share a truth that others may miss. Alternatively, as we see in the tradition of Saint Thomas Aquinas, we must construct a view of reality within which all things are oriented toward the one God of grace.⁷

We know this already from systematic theology. The late theological Titan, Wolfhart Pannenberg, put it this way: systematic theology is “an effort in constructive thought in order to exemplify how the God of the Bible can be understood as creator and Lord of all reality.”⁸ To say it another way, the task of the public systematic theologian is to construct a worldview, a *Lebenswelt* or *Weltanschauung*, within which all things find their place in relation to God the creator and redeemer.

In public discourse, this orientation toward God in worldview construction is widely seen as problematic. This is understandable, because the very reality of God is roundly disputed. Even so, the public theologian can temporarily bracket the God-hypothesis while pointing out the coherence of reality when rationally understood. Moreover, further, by pointing out the signals of transcendent grace which penetrate human understanding and deepen shared intuitions regarding truth and justice.

Currently, social media and regressive politics are creating a global kerfuffle that might benefit from such input by public theologians. Specifically, the rationality of natural science is under attack right along with virtually all truth claims that rely

⁶ Peters, “Public Theology, Discourse Clarification, and Worldview Construction.” A worldview includes both what is objectively real as well as our own subjective perspective. Here is Paul Tillich, “‘World’ is not the sum total of all beings—an inconceivable concept.... ‘world’ [cosmos] is a structure or a unity of manifoldness...that is related to us perspectively The world is the structural whole which includes and transcends all environments.” Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1st ed., 3 Volumes (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:170.

⁷ University of Chicago theologian Langdon Gilkey prescribes such worldview construction. The theologian produces and proffers “a view of society and of the individual, of social ethos and belief, that centers its interpretation on the essential and active presence of the divine in human existence, and that interprets human being, both individual and social, in terms of its relations to that presence.” Langdon Gilkey, *Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (New York: Seabury Crossroad, 1980), 32.

⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 18.

on evidence-based objectivity. For the public theologian to contribute to the surrounding cultural discourse, a partnership between religious reflection and secular science—even scientific skepticism—needs to be established and fostered.

In a previous article, “Prebunking Disinformation in Science, Skepticism, and Theology,” I issued with cautious wit a call for an SST Alliance between Science, Skepticism, and Theology.⁹ What might that look like?

3. Results and Discussion

Reason Under Attack in Our Post-Truth Context

Our natural-scientist friends discipline themselves to rely solely on rigorous, evidence-based reasoning. In recent centuries, this rigor has blessed the world with a cornucopia of new knowledge. However, today, our scientist colleagues are being terrorized by a global outbreak of irrationality. Irrationality may be the threat, but the internet is the medium. The renowned journal, *Science*, sounds the fire alarm.

This new and open model [the internet] has given anyone with web access a global platform to propagate information that is mistakenly or intentionally false. This is especially problematic when it comes to scientific information, which is critical to rational policy-making in areas like health, environmental protection, and national security, and at its best is often misinterpreted by the lay public.¹⁰

Misinformation, some scientists call it. “Misinformation has reached crisis proportions,” say Jevin D. West and Carl T. Bergstrom, writing for the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. They argue, “It poses a risk to international peace, interferes with democratic decision-making, endangers the well-being of the planet, and threatens public health.”¹¹ Around the world, we find ourselves divided by misinformation, false facts, and extremism.¹² Theologian Jennifer Baldwin calls ours a

⁹ Ted Peters, “Prebunking Disinformation in Science, Skepticism, and Theology,” *Theology and Science* 20, no. 4 (October 2022): 381–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2022.2124476>.

¹⁰ Rick Weiss, “Nip Misinformation in the Bud,” *Science* 358, no. 6362 (October 2017): 427, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aar2683>.

¹¹ Jevin D. West and Carl T. Bergstrom, “Misinformation in and About Science,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 15 (April 2021): e1912444117, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1912444117>.

¹² Religious extremism in Indonesia as well as elsewhere in the world contributes to divisiveness. Does religious division produce misinformation and false facts? Is religious moderation the answer? “People who adhered to certain religious extremes often used their identity politics to inspire people with the understanding that attack other religions. The seeds of religious based extremism have led the Indonesian Government through the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia to promote the concept of religious moderation for the Indonesian people. The declaration of religious moderation in the context of religious plurality in Indonesia shows the government’s commitment to seriously manage religious harmony in society.” Fibry Jati Nugroho and Dwi Novita Sari, “Local Practical Religious Moderation in Indonesia: A Case Study of Churches in Getasan District, Semarang Regency,” *KAMASEAN: Jurnal Teologi Kristen* 4, no. 2 (December 2023): 104, <https://doi.org/10.34307/kamasean.v4i2.257>.

“post-truth” global network.¹³ Should we ask the reason for coming to our rescue?

How should we understand the problem? Three key obstacles stand in the way of “clear scientific thought,” according to *Scientific American*. First, *shortcuts*. When our brain becomes overloaded with too much information, we take a shortcut in discernment by accepting group consensus or trusting an expert. Second, *confirmation bias*. We show a natural tendency to pay attention to some findings over others and to interpret mixed evidence to fit our preexisting beliefs. Third, *social goals*. We may become biased to reach one scientific conclusion over another because we are influenced by the desire to win status, to conform to the views of a social network, or even to attract a mate. Recognizing these three obstacles helps us to understand “why people engage in irrational thinking.”¹⁴ We need rational thinking to combat misinformation.

Should we consign religion to irrational thinking and, thereby, irrelevance? Is there a divide separating science and religion on this point? Yes, at least in the public perception. “Religion today is a perspective...but science is not,” observes Talal Asad.¹⁵ Because religion is assigned to a subjective perspective and denies the objectivity claimed by science, religion is thought to be incapable of objective reasoning. This is a mistake. Theologians are well-equipped with reasoning. Reasoning skills married to a moral commitment to truth could generate a sense of family bond among theologians, scientists, and skeptics.

Despite this perceived divide, it strikes me that the scientific community could benefit from external support. Might this be a moment calling the Christian church to step up as an ally to science?¹⁶ Might the public theologian testify to the value, if not

¹³ Jennifer Baldwin, “Knowledge, Power, and Fear: The Role of Religion and Science in Populism and Our Shared Public Life,” in *Navigating Post-Truth and Alternative Facts*, ed. Jennifer Baldwin (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 98.

¹⁴ Adam B. Cohen et al., “The Science of Antiscience Thinking,” *Scientific American* 31, no. 5s (October 2022): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0718-36>.

¹⁵ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 49.

¹⁶ Arvin Gouw, a hybrid geneticist and theologian, reminds us that “the scientific advances that are taking place in society can no longer be ignored if Christianity seeks to remain relevant in today’s world and the future.” Arvin M. Gouw, “Epilogue: Introducing a New Transhumanist Theology,” in *Religious Transhumanism and Its Critics*, ed. Brian Patrick Green, Ted Peters, and Arvin M. Gouw (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 423. Becoming knowledgeable about science will have value for Christian education proper. Sonny Eli Zaluchu along with Zulidyana Dwi Rusnalasari find that younger Christian students need more content to their education. Their “research is focused on seeing the causes of the low performance of lecturers and students in Christian Religious Colleges (PTKK). The three main things that were discussed and analyzed as the root of the problem were the lack of publication awareness, lack of support for infrastructure and funds, and minimal research awareness. Therefore, if PTKK does not immediately present a solution for these three aspects, PTKK will be left behind and eliminated from global competition.” Sonny Eli Zaluchu and Zulidyana Dwi Rusnalasari, “Masalah Publikasi Ilmiah Di Lingkup Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Kristen Indonesia: Problems of Scientific Publication in the Scope of Indonesian Theological Seminary,” *Publishing Letters* 1, no. 1 (June 2021): 9–15, <https://doi.org/10.48078/publetters.v1i1.4>.

the necessity, of rigorous objective reason to guide the wider culture?¹⁷

The Voice of Truth is Calling Us

As already mentioned, the public theologian is in a position to know something about human nature that is most relevant: we humans are naturally inclined to pursue truth. According to Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, we humans are creatures who, in our innermost being, take “more pleasure in truth than in lies.”¹⁸ This should make our task easier because research scientists and public theologians could together ask the world to listen to our inner voice and do what comes naturally.¹⁹

We need to keep in mind that the word, *truth*, connotes more in theology than it does in science. “The joy of truth (*Veritatis Gaudium*) expresses the restlessness of the human heart until it encounters and dwells within God’s Light, and shares that Light with all people,” writes Pope Francis in *Veritas Gaudium*.²⁰ For the theologian, anything short of knowledge of God misses the full Truth with a capital “T”.

Even so, the plurality of truths about the natural world uncovered by rigorous scientific research are gifts to the human race for which we ought to be grateful. University of Chicago biologist and atheist Jerry Coyne capitalizes on the human quest for truth and celebrates the finding of scientific truths. “Science, conceived broadly [is] any endeavor that tries to find the truth about nature using the tools of reason, observation, and experiment.”²¹ This leads Robert John Russell and Kirk Wegter-McNelly, both physicists as well as theologians, to aver: “science at its best, and theology at its best, both pursue truth.”²²

We dare not overlook what lies before our very eyes, namely, there is a moral dimension to truth-seeking. Truth requires commitment of human will, the will of someone. We can ask an AI bot to provide information and even a certain level of reasoning, but not ardor for truth. That fervor for truth can be generated only by the scientist, the skeptic, and the theologian. Urging a moral commitment to truth on the

¹⁷ “Political or public theology helps create the space for new possibilities of what the world might become, not just the public human world, but the natural world as well.” Lisa Stenmark and Whitney Bauman, “Foreword,” in *Navigating Post-Truth and Alternative Facts*, ed. Jennifer Baldwin (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), ix.

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, “Thoughts on the Possibility of Belief Today,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 20.

¹⁹ Peters, “Public Theology, Discourse Clarification, and Worldview Construction,” 1–4.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Constitution “Veritatis Gaudium” on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/01/29/180129c.html>.

²¹ Jerry A. Coyne, *Faith Versus Fact: Why Science and Religion Are Incompatible* (New York: Viking, 2015), 39.

²² Robert John Russell and Kirk Wegter-McNelly, “Science and Theology: Mutual Interaction,” in *Bridging Science and Religion*, ed. Ted Peters and Gaymon Bennett (London, UK: SCM Press, 2004), 34.

part of the wider culture is the distinctive contribution the public theologian can make.

With this commitment, then, the public theologian can in good conscience ally with the natural scientist in the task of distinguishing truth from falsity, information from disinformation, and honesty from deceit.²³

An Alliance with Skepticism?

Skeptics are armed and ready to battle against misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and irrationality. “We [scientific skeptics] strive for a world in which pseudoscientific claims do not deceive or harm anyone,” trumpets Amardeo Sarma writing for the *Skeptical Inquirer*. Sarma stated, “we have a cause of utmost significance.... Let us get on with it!”²⁴

How does a skeptic “get on with it”? City College of New York philosophy professor Massimo Pigliucci answers, “the real business of a skeptic [is] to inquire into issues and educate as many people as will listen.”²⁵

Like natural science, skepticism relies on rigorous evidence-based reasoning. If we are drowning in eddies of misinformation and irrationality, our skeptic friends just may throw the world a life preserver. In “A Skeptical Manifesto”, Michael Shermer tells us that “Modern skepticism is embodied in the scientific method, which involves gathering data to formulate and test naturalistic explanations for natural phenomena.”²⁶

The ancient Greek term, *skeptikos*, connotes being thoughtful, reflective, and inquiring. Yet, curiously, philosophical skepticism includes the assertion that “the very possibility of knowledge or truth is denied.”²⁷ One must then ask the skeptic: Is it really true that truth must be denied? If the answer is affirmative, you can readily see how the skeptic’s position is logically self-contradictory.

Even so, skepticism can still be of value to the public theologian. What we have inherited of value from the skeptic’s outlook is commitment to rigor in doubting until one is convinced by judgment that something can be accepted as genuine

²³ Truth is inherently powerful. “The greatest weapon against fear is truth.” Sunday Bobai Agang, “The Need for Public Theology in Africa,” in *African Public Theology*, ed. Sunday Bobai Agang, Diaon A. Forster, and H. Jurgens Hendriks (Carlisle, UK: Langham Publishing, 2020), 11.

²⁴ Amardeo Sarma, “Skepticism Reloaded,” *Skeptical Inquirer: The Magazine for Science and Reason*, August 2018, 41, 43, <https://skepticalinquirer.org/2018/07/skepticism-reloaded>.

²⁵ Massimo Pigliucci, “The Nature of Pseudoscience, How to Fight It, and Why It Matters,” *Skeptical Inquirer: The Magazine for Science and Reason*, June 2026, 28, <https://skepticalinquirer.org/2026/04/the-nature-of-pseudoscience-how-to-fight-it-and-why-it-matters>.

²⁶ Michael Shermer, “A Skeptical Manifesto,” *Skeptic Magazine*, 1977, https://www.skeptic.com/about_us/manifesto. Shermer contends that skepticism is married to science. “Science is a specific way of thinking and acting — a tool for understanding information that is perceived directly or indirectly (“observed or inferred”).”

²⁷ Paul Kurtz, *Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1986), 27.

knowledge.²⁸ “Skepticism is thus an essential component of inquiry and a necessary aspect of critical intelligence,” philosopher Paul Kurtz tells us; “Without it, science and the development of human knowledge would not be possible.”²⁹ Like the skeptic, the public theologian should be ready to doubt what we find in social media until it can be demonstrated to be accurate.

The benefit of the skeptical posture is its commitment to rigorous evidence-based reasoning before accepting a claim to be accurate. Commitment to reason belongs to skepticism’s method. As such, it is worthy of theological embrace. Nevertheless, skepticism’s ideological content remains unacceptable. What smears skepticism with ideological graffiti is the unnecessary bludgeoning of religious belief and the denunciation of theology. Our skeptic friends denounce religious belief, declaring faith to be irrational.

Like an army marching against enemies such as claims of the paranormal or other superstitions, today’s skeptics fire their deadliest howitzers at the bastions of religious belief. Religious traditions are denounced as a collection of fairy tales, fantasies, and wish-dreams. “Religious fantasies are kindled by a fearful response to the ambiguities of mortal existence,” decries Kurtz. “And they weigh down frail human spirits who are seeking to find in their dreams some refuge from the vicissitudes of fortune.”³⁰ Such an anti-religious assessment suggests that skeptics are not likely to ally with friendly public theologians.

The lines have been drawn between two conflicting approaches to the ultimate nature of human reality in the universe. The proponents of the practical stance call themselves empiricists, or rationalists, or scientific skeptics. They are skeptical about the claim of faith that the universe is divine. They are the atheists and agnostics of old; today they are called secular humanists.... Ranged against them are the disciples of a transcendental and theistic worldview.³¹

Should the public theologian wave the white flag and surrender? No, I do not recommend surrender.

For the sake of discourse clarification, note how Kurtz, the skeptic, thinks he’s dealing with the “ultimate nature of human reality.” Is this coherent? No. This would make Kurtz *de facto* religious. “Religion is ultimate concern,” observes Paul Tillich. “It is the state of being grasped by something unconditional, holy, absolute.”³² In his denial of the divine at the level of ultimacy, Kurtz is actually practicing theology without a license.

²⁸ The Christian need not fear doubt. “Faith and doubt do not essentially contradict each other. Faith is the continuous tension between itself and the doubt within itself.” Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 60.

²⁹ Kurtz, *Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal*, 35.

³⁰ Kurtz, *Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal*, xi.

³¹ Kurtz, *Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal*, xi.

³² Paul Tillich, “Religion and Secular Culture,” in *Main Works / Hauptwerke*, vol. 2, ed. Carl Heinz Ratschow, Writings in the Philosophy of Culture (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989), 201.

But more importantly, the theological claim of “faith that the universe is divine” is simply not subject to Kurtz’s reasoning at the level of empirical science. Evidence-based reasoning limits itself to things of this world. It does not extend to claims regarding transcendental matters or ultimate reality. If the skeptic would stick to a selected domain of empirical reasoning and refrain from making claims about reality itself, then a partnership regarding the importance of evidence-based reasoning could become quite amicable.

Such amicability will demand that we distinguish between methodological skepticism and ideological skepticism. Methodologically, the skeptic, like the scientist, wants to separate out unquestioned assumptions, superstitions, pseudo-science, and such. Ideologically, some skeptics, such as Kurtz, use this method as a stepping stone to a worldview that is reductionistic, materialistic, and atheistic. The public theologian should invite the public to rejoice over methodological skepticism while eschewing such a drab and debilitating ideology.

Is Theology Really Irrational?

How should the public theologian respond to the accusation that religion is irrational? The theologian needs to distinguish between two levels of interpreting reality, the rational level and the supra-rational or fundamental level of faith.

Reason, even scientific reason, cannot, on the basis of reason, establish its own fundamental connection with ultimate reality. Scientists knowingly or unknowingly nest evidence-based reasoning within a more foundational faith commitment. That faith commitment is the belief that the natural world everywhere in the universe is orderly, lawlike, and rational. Even the famed Albert Einstein recognized the role of faith underlying scientific reasoning.

Science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling, however, springs from the sphere of religion. To this there also belongs the faith in the possibility that the regulations valid for the world of existence are rational, that is, comprehensible to reason. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist without that profound faith.³³

This fundamental faith translates into the scientist’s moral ardor for truth. Whether it is acknowledged or not, there is a morality to scientific knowledge, a commitment to truth.

From time to time, scientists may allow this fundamental faith level to drift away from awareness. Theologians, in contrast, keep the faith level constantly in focus. At the faith level, people of faith respond to God’s revelatory presence with symbolic discourse. The Bible is cast in symbolic discourse that resonates with double meanings: everyday meanings combined with transcendental reference. Symbolic

³³ Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 46.

meaning is not irrational. It is suprarational. Symbolically articulated faith seeks rational reflection, as Augustine says, *fides quaerens intellectum*.

"The symbol gives rise to thought," avers philosopher Paul Ricoeur.³⁴ Christian theology consists of reflective thought about what is revealed by God through symbolic language. "Symbols, although they are not the same as that which they symbolize, participate in its meaning and power," Paul Tillich reminds us.³⁵

The rationality of theological discourse takes place at the second level of reflection. It is articulated at the level of reflection upon symbolic meaning. Symbolic meaning comes prior. Within the theological setting, reason is not self-grounding. Rather, reason interprets the symbolized experience of God's self-revelation remembered in Holy Scripture.³⁶

Our conclusion is this: rationality for the theologian ranks at the same level as rationality for the scientist and even for the skeptic. Reason on its own does not have access to the ultimate reality. Only faith does, whether it's faith in the structure of the universe or faith in the God who created the universe. There is nothing in the nature of reason that should prevent an SST Alliance.

Does Worldview Construction Require Faith in God?

As already mentioned, to apprehend reality realistically, one must acknowledge that the physical world we inhabit can best be understood in light of its creator, God. Without God in the equation, so to speak, we can amass only truths but not Truth.

Our Muslim colleagues take this matter with utmost seriousness. According to Shiite Seyyed Hossein Nasr, for example, no partnership with either science or skepticism would be possible. "Islam refuses to accept the legitimacy of any science that would study the cosmos in forgetfulness of God."³⁷ For science to fully describe the natural world as it truly is, it would have to become theologized. "No science can be acceptable to Islam that does not in some way remind man of the Wisdom of the One from whom everything issues and to whom everything returns."³⁸ In short, science itself needs to be reformed so that it fits God into its worldview.

³⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 237.

³⁵ Paul Tillich, "Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God," in *Main Works / Hauptwerke*, vol. 4, ed. Carl Heinz Ratschow (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989), 396.

³⁶ "Theology should not weaken the concrete symbols, but it must analyze them and interpret them in abstract and ontological terms." Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:244.

³⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Question of Cosmogenesis— The Cosmos as A Subject of Scientific Study," *Islam and Science* 4, no. 1 (2006): 59, https://jisarchive.cis-ca.org/_media/pdf/2006/1/A_tqoccaasoss.pdf.

³⁸ Nasr, "The Question of Cosmogenesis— The Cosmos as A Subject of Scientific Study," 59. According to Zainal Abidin Bagir at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, "Nasr has criticized both Western science and religion strongly because, in his analysis, both have been secularized while he espouses a traditional perennial philosophy (*scientia sacra*). Other scholars are

Yes, indeed, I expect a Christian systematic theologian or constructive theologian to insist that an adequate worldview include the orientation of all things in reality to the one God of grace. In this respect, Islam and Christianity share a worldview. Nevertheless, in the present situation with its urgency in combating misinformation and disinformation, I do not recommend that the public theologian wait for such a reformation within the sciences. Rather, accepting the limited scope of both scientific reasoning and skeptical reasoning, the public theologian should immediately engage the cultural controversy with a proposed worldview that honors and respects evidence-based reasoning.

An SST Alliance should ready itself to engage the wider culture by demanding public respect for evidence-based reasoning and construct a moral worldview oriented toward the common good. When the public Christian theologian and the public Islamic theologian come to an agreement on this mission, they will be ready to offer a united witness in support of both the scientists and the skeptics who wish to replace our post-truth moment with a rational epoch.

4. Conclusion

Our guiding question in this article has been this: How can public theology constructively ally with science and skepticism in responding to the global truth crisis? Our answer is that the public theologian should reaffirm evidence-based reasoning for setting public policy and urge a moral commitment to truth. This mission would lead to an SST alliance between science, skepticism, and theology.

Please do not consider this proposal for an SST Alliance as a variant on the plea for pluralism or religious tolerance. SST is not a form of postmodern pluralism that merely artificializes or respects the existence of religious plurality. Religious tolerance is healthy for society, to be sure. But this is not the point here. The task of this article has been something else. We have been suggesting that the Christian public theologian engage the wider culture in rational discourse regarding truth versus falsity, information versus disinformation, and the common good over division.

We recommend the public theologian partake in an SST Alliance made up of Science, Skepticism, and Theology together, lifting a vision of the common good. Constructing a worldview rationally focused on the common good is, within the Christian vision, a prolepsis of God's promised Kingdom of God. We can thank Pope Benedict XVI for lifting up this vision as a guide, particularly his emphasis on how the pursuit of the common good in a globalized society must encompass the entire human

more receptive to modern science but attempt to discard the secular or even atheistic metaphysical implications of science." Zainal Abidin Bagir, "The 'Relation' Between Science and Religion in the Pluralistic Landscape of Today's World," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 50, no. 2 (June 2015): 411, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12177>.

family, shaping the earthly city in unity and peace to prefigure the undivided city of God. To conclude, this public engagement ultimately calls on public theologians to revere Christ in their hearts by always being prepared to give a reasoned defense to anyone who asks for the hope within them, doing so with absolute gentleness and respect (1Pet 3:15).

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