

KARL POPPER AND RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE:  
THE VALUE OF APPLYING CRITICAL RATIONALISM  
TO THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

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The aim of this paper is to outline the merit of bringing Popper's critical rationalism to bear on problems in theology. The first half is concerned with describing and defending the use of the critical rational method in Christian theology. It begins with a discussion of the special parallels between theology, classically considered, and Popper's methodological principles. Popper's cosmological realism is used as the bridge between scientific and theological method. Empirical testing and falsification are treated next. It is argued that theological hypotheses can be viewed as subject to intersubjectivity and potentially falsifying tests, though the 'experimental apparatus' will be unique, owing to the unique object of enquiry. Finally, application is made of Popper's proposed 'professional ethics' to the theological community.

The second half of the paper sketches the benefit of applying Popper's methodology to two specific theological problems. First, it is argued that the Church's understanding of the divinity of Christ has grown through a process of human hypotheses and refutations (often birthed through the critical discussions of the Church councils). Further, a full understanding of the present state of the problem is possible only in the light of the previous trial solutions and the errors which have been eliminated. The second problem treated is the problem of rationality in human beings. Modern Christian thought tends to minimize the importance of reason as a central trait of human life from a theological perspective. It will be argued here — from the premises that 'world 3' is indispensable for Popperian falsifiability and that God is best understood as God who expresses himself through his Word — that when we accept conjecture and refutation as the best model (of which we know) for the progress of knowledge, we gain valuable insight into the theological import of human rationality.