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By Good and Necessary Consequence: Preliminary Genealogy of Biblicist Foundationalism (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Bovell, Carlos R. *By Good and Necessary Consequence: A Preliminary Genealogy of Biblicist Foundationalism*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009. xiv + 173 pages. ISBN: 978-1-60608-457-1. Reviewed by Calvin Jongmsa, Professor of Mathematics, Dordt College.

One of the five *Solas* of the Protestant Reformation, and the one often listed first, is *Sola Scriptura* – by *Scripture alone*. Reformers asserted this doctrine over against Roman Catholicism to emphasize not only that Scripture is God's Word written but that it is the sole authority for matters pertaining to salvation, the only rule for Christian life. As the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) put it in 1646,

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. [Chapter I, Article VI]

The title of Bovell's book comes from this passage. In affirming the authoritative primacy of Scripture, it seemed, at least to some later Protestants, that the WCF also took the Bible to be an inerrant sourcebook of propositional truths for theologians to develop into dogmatic theology by means of conclusive deductive reasoning. It is this biblicist foundationalism that Carlos Bovell finds problematic, even disturbing. His earlier book, *Inerrancy and the Spiritual Formation of Younger Evangelicals* (2007), focused on the pastoral dangers inherent in the contemporary evangelical Christian view of Scripture as a self-revelatory, inerrant, objective basis for doctrine and life. *By Good and Necessary Consequence* continues his negative examination of this trend by focusing on its alleged historical origins in the WCF.

Bovell's overarching polemical goal in *By Good and Necessary Consequence* is thus to demonstrate that biblicist foundationalism is an inappropriate methodology and stance for evangelical Christianity today. In this book he uses scholarly historical and philosophical analyses to make his case.

In the first chapter Bovell links the rationalist tendency of the WCF to Cartesian deductivism. To combat the prevailing skepticism of the early seventeenth century as well as provide a sound alternative to Catholicism and religious enthusiasts, Westminster divines adopted an approach strikingly similar to Descartes' foundationalist strategy, only using the Bible as their basis. The rigorous methodology of mathematics, exhibited in its axiomatic

treatment of geometry, provided a model for generating sure knowledge in a time of uncertainty.

After introducing his thesis concerning the WCF's adoption of biblicist foundationalism, Bovell argues the novelty of such a deductivist epistemology by looking at earlier understandings and uses of the axiomatic deductive method. In successive chapters he presents several historical case studies: the origins of deductive science in Pythagorean theorizing; the role of deductive and dialectical reasoning in Plato's thought; Aristotle's use of mathematical demonstration for philosophical purposes; Euclid's deductive procedure in his *Elements*; Proclus' deductive metaphysics and theology; and Boethius' axiomatic approach to ethics, along with Aquinas' extended commentary thereon. In each case, Bovell concentrates on the role played by deductive reasoning, arguing that it lacked the epistemological import it was given by seventeenth-century philosophers and scientists.

With these case studies on the use of the axiomatic method in place, Bovell contrasts the earlier viewpoints with those of Descartes and the WCF. The central conclusion he draws from the comparisons he makes is that the deductive method made prominent by mathematics is an inadequate epistemic instrument for philosophy and theology. In particular, it fails to account for the subjectivity and uncertainty inherent in interpreting Scripture. Furthermore, as significant twentieth-century technical developments in foundations of mathematics show, an axiomatic approach cannot guarantee the completeness of the theory resulting from its deductive basis (Gödel's incompleteness theorem).

The book ends with a couple of tangential non-historical essays. Chapter 11 points out the potential perils to one's faith when its presumed biblicist foundation is challenged. And the final chapter sketches a Husserlian alternative to biblicist foundationalism. Though these don't advance the main thesis of his work, they do address Bovell's overall aim to replace biblicist foundationalism with something better.

As a Christian mathematics educator professionally interested in historical and philosophical matters, I found the book's treatment of its topics engaging. It's not often one gets to read a book that combines mathematics, theology, and philosophy in an interesting and thoughtful way. Bovell's training in and attachment to theology and philosophy may be stronger than his background in

mathematics and its history, but his scholarly accounts in the various mathematical case studies are grounded in numerous good and reputable sources – his full bibliography of 440 items continues for 23 pages, almost a sixth as long as the 149 pages of larger font written text, and only a bit shy of the total number of footnotes he includes. Readers interested in historical or dogmatic theology will probably find his overall conclusions and some of his philosophical analyses interesting and provocative, though I suspect those portions related to mathematics may wash over them without much impact.

By Good and Necessary Consequence is an ambitious undertaking. Or perhaps I should say that it is a program for such an undertaking, for the book is too short to accomplish much more than to set out an agenda for and initiate research into its topic, to give *A Preliminary Genealogy of Biblicist Foundationalism*, as the book's subtitle acknowledges. I found its historical findings worth serious consideration, but I also thought some aspects could be developed further or tightened up.

In the first place, while I am convinced that the WCF exhibits signs of responding to seventeenth-century skepticism in ways that match what is being done by others, such as Descartes, the lines of historical influence and the relevant historical context need to be laid out more carefully. Juxtaposing and comparing the WCF quote I gave above with two sentences from Rule 3 in Descartes' *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Bovell suggests several times that Westminster divines shared Descartes' concerns and methodological approach. But since the WCF was published in 1646 and Descartes' essay remained unpublished until 1684, no *direct* influence can have occurred in precisely this way. Moreover, Descartes is best known in history of mathematics circles for founding analytic geometry, a field of mathematics that was *not* organized axiomatically but instead combined geometry with the non-deductive computational field of algebra. This trend ought to be considered further and factored in if the paradigm for the WCF's foundationalism is to be located in Descartes' assimilation of mathematical method into philosophy.

However, it is not clear to me why the source of

deductivist foundationalism can't be traced back to Aristotle and Euclid, as many have held. Bovell claims that the axiomatic method did not function in an epistemic manner in ancient Greece or later, but I find his arguments for this less than convincing. For Aristotle and others, grounding a demonstrative theory upon true first principles (known without proof) and developing it deductively from these truths with rigorous arguments are what make its results knowledge (science) instead of mere opinion. In other words, I believe the epistemic novelty that Bovell claims for Descartes and other seventeenth-century thinkers regarding deduction needs further substantiation or qualifying. At the very least, it would be good to flesh out in more detail how seventeenth-century thinkers appropriated the deductive legacy of Aristotle and Euclid, particularly in non-mathematical fields such as philosophy and theology.

Regardless of where the philosophical paradigm for biblicist foundationalism originates, pinpointing and characterizing the source for this theological trend should also be done more carefully. Several questions remain after finishing the book. Which Westminster divines were responsible for making Scripture the deductive basis for theology? What did this mean in practice for them? Did any of them or their followers ever attempt to develop an axiomatic theology? Or was their notion of the relation of Scripture to theology different from what is present in axiomatic mathematics? Also, the WCF notes that the illumination of the Holy Spirit is necessary for a saving understanding of Scripture and that there are ecclesial matters "which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence." This doesn't seem like hard-core biblical foundationalism to me; others must therefore have developed biblicist foundationalism into a stricter viewpoint at a later date. Or perhaps the notion of deducing results by "good and necessary consequence" remains much looser in theology than it is in mathematics.

These questions and observations don't detract from the overall thesis and value of the book, but they highlight some points that would benefit from further reflection and refinement. Perhaps Bovell will take these matters up in a later publication, building on the solid beginning he has made here.

Smith, James K. A. *The Devil Reads Derrida (and Other Essays on the University, the Church, Politics, and the Arts)*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009. Reviewed by David Schelhaas, Emeritus Professor of English, Dordt College.

Don't let the title scare you off. You don't have to understand Derrida to understand Smith—you don't even have to know who Derrida is, though you might want to find out after you have read the clever little title essay. In it Smith quotes a speech by fashion-czar Miranda (Meryl Streep) from the movie *The Devil Wears Prada* in which Miranda chastises her assistant Andy for her scornful attitude toward fashion, showing how the lumpy cerulean

sweater she's wearing is the color it is because of what Oscar de la Renta and St Laurent did several years earlier. In other words, you are affected by the actions of the fashion world whether you know it or not. And in the same way that French fashion trickles down to the stuff you buy from the "Nearly New" store, French philosophy and Post-Modern thought from philosophers like Derrida, Smith suggests, can affect how you think and act.