

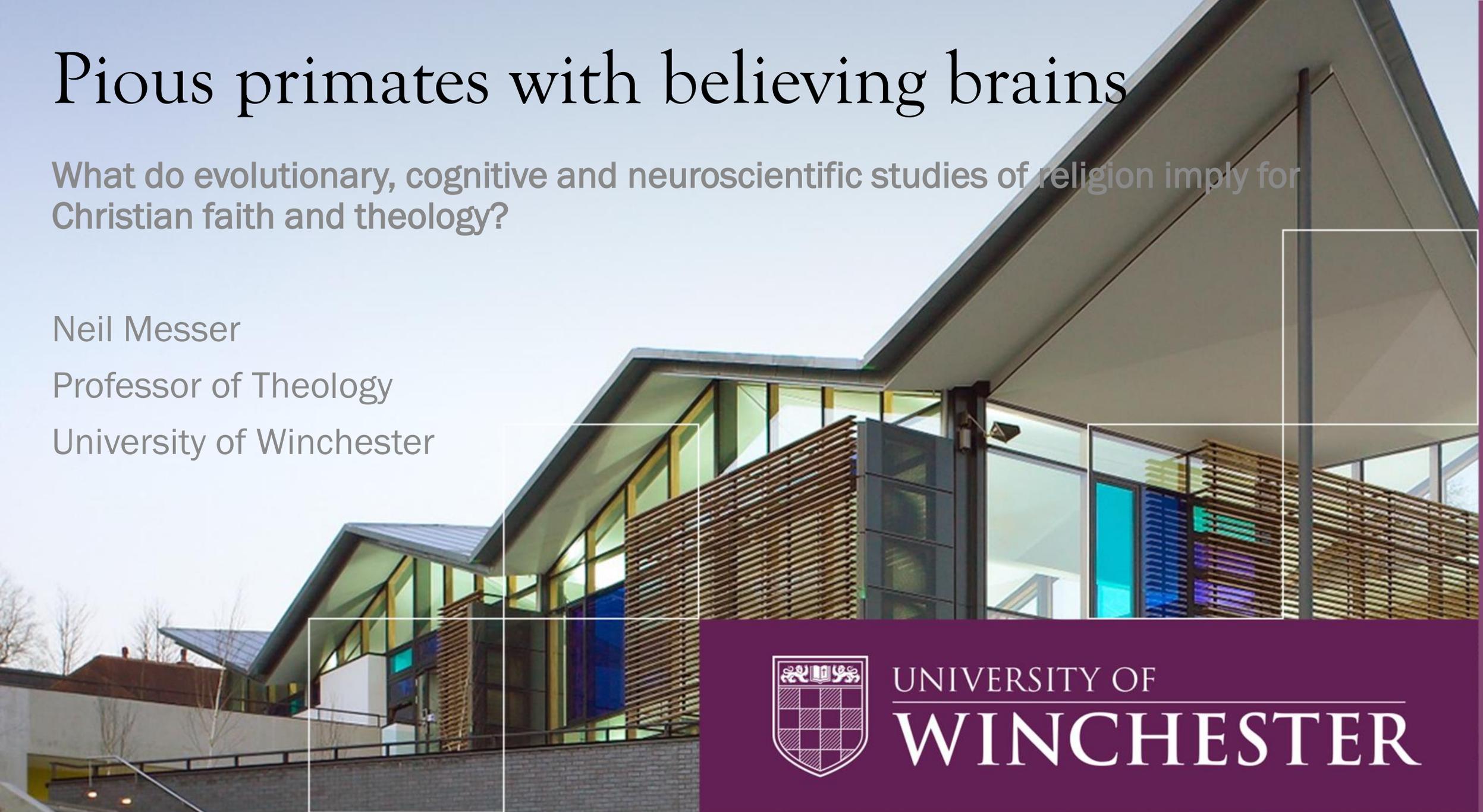
# Pious primates with believing brains

What do evolutionary, cognitive and neuroscientific studies of religion imply for Christian faith and theology?

Neil Messer

Professor of Theology

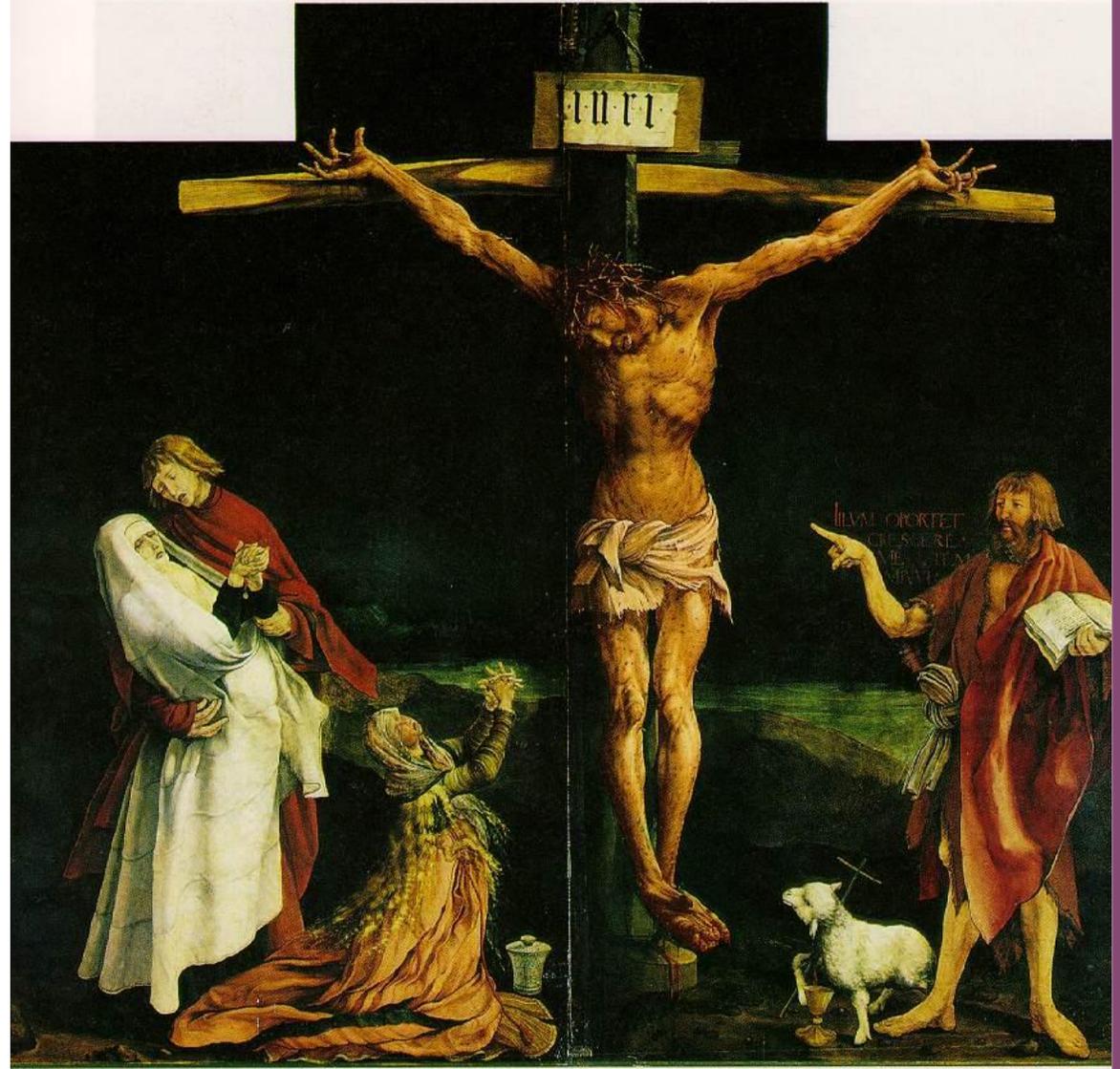
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# Christian faith and theology

- Christians worship God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ
- Take our beliefs and practices to be responses to divine self-revelation
- Theology: 'faith seeking understanding'



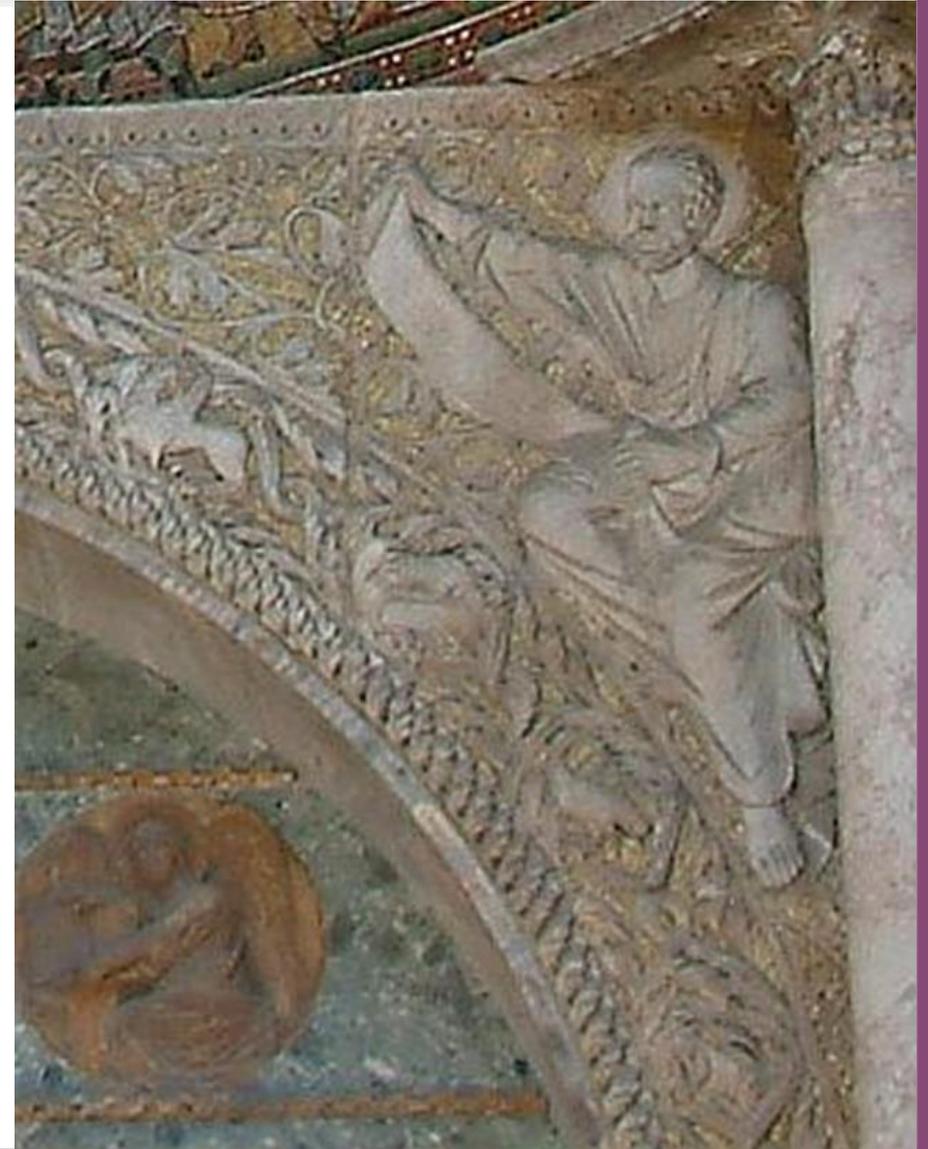
Matthias Grunewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512-16)



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# Scientific study of religion

- Cognitive science of religion
  - The 'standard model': HADD, inference-rich concepts, theory of mind, minimally counterintuitive (MCI) concepts
- Evolution
  - Religion as spandrel or adaptation?
- Neuroscience:
  - Neural correlates of religious beliefs/practices/experiences
  - NS models of religious experience



# The question

- Scientific studies of religion seek *naturalistic* explanations for beliefs and practices...
- which Christians take to be responses to God's revelation in Christ
- What is the significance of these explanations for Christian belief, practice and understanding?
  - In conflict?
  - Irrelevant?
  - Can they inform Christian faith, and how?



Theophile Marie Francois Lybaert, *Old Flanders* (1915, detail)



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# Five options

- How much (and what) should Christian theology learn from the scientific study of religion?
- Conversation between ‘voices’ of Christian tradition and scientific discipline
  1. Only the scientific voice contributes (a monologue)
  2. The scientific voice predominates
  3. Neither voice predominates
  4. The voice of the Christian tradition predominates
  5. Only the voice of the Christian tradition contributes (monologue again)



Arnold Lachovsky, *The Conversation* (ca. 1935, detail)



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# Type 1: only the scientific voice contributes

- Ontological naturalism and debunking arguments (e.g. Paul Bloom)
  - But methodological naturalism does not => ontological naturalism
- Barrett: ‘universal natural theology’
  - Appeals to revelation are ‘out of bounds’
  - Dependent on contested philosophical theory (Reformed Epistemology)



Paul Bloom, image: Fronteiras do Pensamento, Wikimedia Commons, [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license](#)



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# Type 2: the scientific voice predominates

- Neurotheology
- Apologetic and (re-)constructive project
- Metatheology and megatheology
- Problem: vulnerable to type 1 challenge

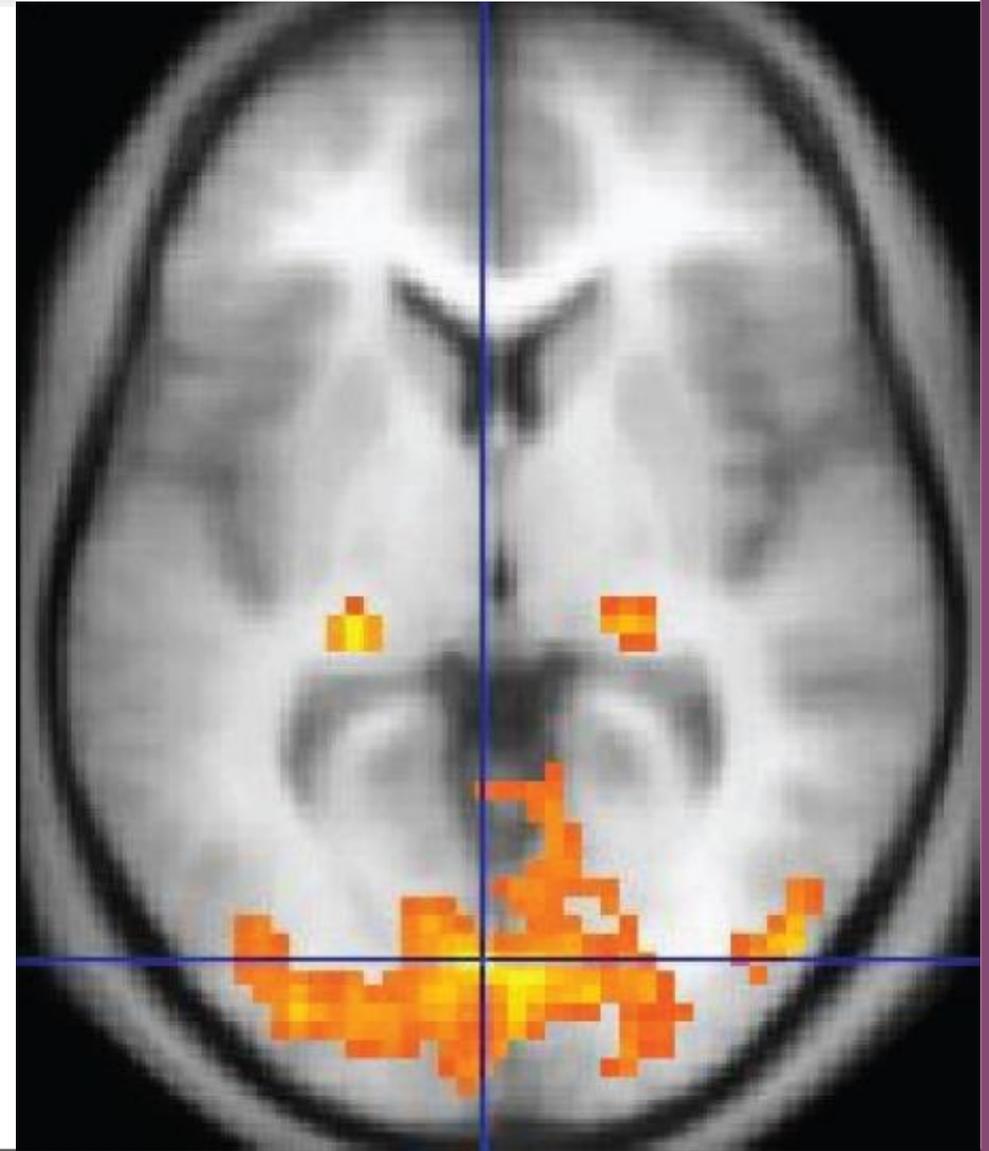


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# Type 3: neither voice predominates

- Barrett: 'confessional natural theology' (following Alister McGrath)
- Problem: drifts towards type 2



Alister McGrath (2008), image by Matthias Asgeirsson (detail), Wikimedia Commons, [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license](#).



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# Type 4: voice of the Christian tradition predominates

- Scientific studies of religion as ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’
  - Analogy with Barth on Feuerbach
- 1. Critical and corrective role for theology
- 2. Possibly also constructive role
- 3. Dialogue with other traditions and disciplines
- 4. Common cause on matters of shared concern



Karl Barth (1956): Bundesarchiv, Bild 194-1283-23A / Lachmann, Hans / CC-BY-SA 3.0 (detail). [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Germany](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/) license.



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## Type 5: only the voice of the Christian tradition contributes

- Harrison: shifting meanings of 'science' and 'religion'
- Until recently the idea of a 'scientific' study of 'religion' would have made no sense
- Does that mean engaging with 'scientific study of religion' is bound to distort/mislead theology?



Gerrit Dou, *Astronomer by Candlelight* (late 1650s, detail), J. Paul Getty Museum. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.



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# Conclusion

- A different way of framing the science/faith relationship:
  - Not how 'science' and 'religion' relate to each other
  - What theology ('faith seeking understanding') should learn from scripture, tradition, science
- Five types of answer:
  - Types 1 and 5 generally unsatisfactory (but exceptions?)
  - Type 2 problematic
  - Types 3 and 4 more satisfactory but need each other's correction
- Neil Messer, *Science in Theology: Encounters between Science and the Christian Tradition* (Bloomsbury, 2020)



Raphael, *Theology*, in Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace (1509-11)



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