

THE NEWTONIAN SETTLEMENT AND THE ORIGINS OF ATHEISM

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Introduction

The nature of the sciences and their relationship one with another have engaged the educated intellects of Western civilization since the centuries of the ancient Greeks, but neither the definitions of these disciplines nor the texture of their interrelationships or mutual adjustments have achieved a fixity that would allow either for a stable curriculum within institutions of higher learning and inquiry, or for a settlement which one generation would, without radical modification, accept from those who had gone before. To study the history of intellectual culture is to encounter with some fair degree of regularity such issues as what constitutes the physical sciences and mathematics; how these relate to the biological sciences and (even more) to the newly designated *Geisteswissenschaften*; how all of these bear resemblances or distinguishing differences to what passes for the arts of a given period or for "the more humane letters"; and how validly one can differentiate or dialectically identify theoretical, practical, and productive inquiries, and successfully delimit from these the arts of interpretation, persuasion, and creativity.

These common issues of culture assume an increasing complexity when one asks about the relationship of such sciences or arts or disciplines with theology. Helmut Peukert has remarked that "in our century theories of science have radically challenged the very possibility of theology," while arguing that a "certain convergence can be established between contemporary reflection on the fundamental principles of theology on one side and the results of research into the theory of science on the other." Peukert lays the basis for this fundamental theology in Habermas' theory of communicative action.¹ But over the centuries one can trace a similar reformulation of theology with its commensurate recasting of appropriate issues and methods as one or another of the academic disciplines assumes an hegemony in systematic reflection. The idealization of geometry, for example, brought Alanus de Insulis to frame the first apologetic work of the Middle Ages within a set of definitions, postulates, and axioms from which he would deduce theorem after theological theorem to demonstrate the truth of the Catholic faith against the Albigensians, the Waldensians, the Jews, and the Muslims. The legal and rhetorical methods of Roman controversy, moving dialectically through oppositions to their resolutions in the tracts of Hincmar of Rheims and Gratian, advanced into theology through the *Sic et Non* of Abelard and then into Peter Lombard's