Natural Theology: Is It Scriptural?

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[6] Natural theology I take to mean the type of exercise pursued by Christian thinkers such as Aquinas, Anselm and Charles Hodge which sought to demonstrate rationally the existence and some of the attributes of God. The intention of the exercise was rationally to confirm the faith of Christians and also to serve as pre-evangelism with respect to unbelievers. The biblical faith presupposes the existence of God. If reason could demonstrate this central and vital presupposition, what could be more basic to the church's mission than to develop and refine the most powerful rational arguments for the existence of God? The thought behind this programme was simple. If Christianity is true then unbiased natural reason will support it--at least to the extent of demonstrating the reality of God, natural law and the immortality of the soul. In this way natural theology, while being completely a branch of philosophy (i.e. relying exclusively on natural reason rather than faith), would also serve as a handmaid to revealed theology. While the method of natural theology was to be that of philosophy the conclusions were to be those of Theism. The disciplinary paradigm of natural theology requires the demonstration of Theism. Within the medieval wor1dview such a research programme for natural theology was virtually inevitable.

However, the Enlightenment balked at the idea of having theistic conclusions prescribed in advance. The complete autonomy of reason was demanded. Philosophy must be able to follow the arguments to whatever conclusions they led without the constraint of the dogmas of revealed theology. David Hume makes clear his own commitment to autonomous human thought when he writes:

> 'Tis certainly a kind of indignity to philosophy, whose sovereign authority ought everywhere to be acknowledged, to oblige her on every occasion to make apologies for her conclusions, and to justify herself to every particular art and science which may be offended at her. This puts one in mind of a king being arraigned for high treason against his subjects.

In short the Enlightenment transformed the research programme of natural theology into that of the philosophy of religion, the name of which appeared in the latter years of the eighteenth century. The subservience of philosophy to theology had been reversed. Reason was to determine what could count as revelation, which tended to mean (following the Deists) that whatever could not be demonstrated by reason about God, man and the world should be rejected as unnecessary at best, and absurd and superstitious dogma at worst.

Having sketched in this background, I think the intrinsic instability of the research programme of natural theology is apparent. The Enlightenment embraced the method of natural theology and maintained that that required the complete rejection of theistic conclusions stipulated in advance. Agnostic or atheistic conclusions were not to be ruled out in advance. The sovereign authority of the method of philosophy--autonomous rationa1ity--must reign supreme. One can recognise in this development a certain consistency as one moves from the semi-autonomous reason of medieval scholasticism to the fully autonomous reason of the Enlightenment.

At this point we can return to our initial question 'Natural Theology: Is It Scriptural?' We can now ask in rep1y--which pole do you mean? The pole of its purported method or the requirement of the consistency with the biblical theism in

its conclusions? With respect to the latter there is a question as to whether the God of classical philosophy (First Mover, Necessary Being, etc.) can rightly be identified with the God who reveals himself in the Scriptures. However there is no doubt that the Scriptural revelation of God--as far [7] as reason could reach--was the normative conclusion of natural theology. The real issue as far as I can see concerns the method which natural theology shares with its offspring, philosophy of religion.

Is that method, and what it presupposes, Scriptural? (In this context there is not time to deal with the biblical materials which bear on the issue of natural theology. I simply refer you to G. C. Berkouwer's brilliant study *General Revelation* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1955, now IVP.) Shortly I wish to argue that the method in question is precisely the one underlying contemporary liberal academic theology which has its roots in the Enlightenment rationalism which in turn derived from the method side of natural theology as an academic discipline so that its components come into clearer view.

In my view every academic discipline is constituted by the synthesis of (1) a disciplinary, ontology, a defined field of investigation, and (2) a disciplinary epistemology and methodology deemed to be most suitable for gaining reliable and systematic knowledge of the field. In other words every possible discipline is constituted by philosophical presuppositions which both transcend and structure the discipline.

In the light of this let us briefly consider the natural theology of Thomas Aquinas. On the side of ontology he assumes an Aristotelian world of nature--hierarchical, teleological and hylomorphic. On the side of epistemology he maintains that all knowledge begins with the senses--intellectual abstraction from what is sensed, followed by deductive inferences. Consequently this whole ontology and epistemology--virtually a whole worldview --needs to be assumed before Aquinas can begin to formulate his theistic proofs. In short the proofs are going to be strictly relative to the assumptions made, as are all proofs. Moreover, even when these assumptions are granted it is highly doubtful whether it is possible to deduce the existence and attributes of God in the Christian sense.

While natural theology (like philosophy of religion) may try to describe itself as an unbiased exercise of 'pure reason' it cannot proceed "without wide-ranging philosophical assumptions about man and the world--which is the common situation of every discipline. If you begin without God in your assumptions, you will not find Him in your conclusion--unless you cheat. The central problem with natural theology is that it takes certain conceptions of man and the world as given and intelligible without reference to God and then asks--does God exist too? This is diametrically opposed to the biblical view that the revelation of God is given rather than inferred, pervading the whole of creation and therefore leaving mankind 'without excuse' for its ingratitude and idolatry and culpable ignorance. Not only so, but man's self-knowledge and understanding of his place in the world depends upon a true knowledge of God. Without it he struggles and wanders in darkness. We have already quoted Hume's proud words concerning the autonomy of reason. Where did it lead him and what light did (empiricist) reason throw upon reality for him? These are his own words:

> The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger

> must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty. [8]

Hume realised that he could not live with such conclusions. However, instead of questioning the assumptions--especially that of the autonomy of reason--that led him inexorably to them, he simply announces that having reimmersed himself in the distractions of everyday life, when he returns to his speculations later 'they appear so cold, and strained and ridiculous, that I cannot find it in my heart to enter into them further.' Nor is the situation substantially different if we move from Enlightenment epistemology to the contemporary academic world for they are both moved by the same secular and empiricist spirit of humanistic philosophy. Today we find massive fragmentation of knowledge both between and within disciplines; e.g., reductionistic monisms and uncoordinated plura1isms, dogmatism and scepticism, and formalistic abstractness. These infect the academic world with meaninglessness and restlessness--an infection which is rapidly transmitted to every part of human life through the educational (mal)formation of its leadership.

Having sketched out something of the fallout of the principle of rationalism which underlies the method of natural theology--showing it to be unScriptural and therefore culturally disastrous--I want to conclude as I have promised with a few remarks which could be headed 'Theology: Is it Scriptural?' This is a serious and not rhetorical question to ask about the main schools of contemporary academic theology--for there is a real sense in which the method of 'natural reason' which was formerly restricted to natural theology (as part of philosophy) has now been extended to theology proper. The rot has spread—so to speak--from philosophy to theology. If we consider theology as an academic discipline, then there are the two related sides of its field of investigation and its method, as we have discussed previously. With respect to method, how should its field of investigation (Christ, the Scriptures, Christian history and experience, etc.) be rightly approached? To put the matter even more concretely, 'Should the Bible be approached like any other book?' Yes, says the secularist. No, says the dualistic Christian. In my opinion the proper answer lies at a deeper level. The Bible and every other book should be approached within a perspective illuminated by the Bible. We want not only a Christian theology but Christian linguistics, literary criticism, etc., etc. Indeed, without these latter developments Christian theology itself will be seriously defective. Our scholarly calling in every field of knowledge is to make every thought, concept, theory, paradigm and research programme subject to the lordship of Christ.

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