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What's the Use of Natural Theology?

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Defining our terms

Kretzmann: '...forgoing appeals to any putative revelation or religious experience as evidence for the truth of propositions, and accepting as data only those few naturally evident considerations that traditionally constitute data acceptable for philosophy generally. That's what makes it *natural* theology' (Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I* (Oxford UP, 1997), p. 2).

Thesis One: Natural theology is useful for showing that the Christian faith is rational

Harrison: 'the project of constructing arguments for God's existence based on putatively neutral premises gets under way in earnest in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when a secular conception of reason begins to emerge' (Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, Chicago UP, 2015), p. 74).

Anselm: 'In fact we proclaim what is useful for the salvation of souls only what Sacred Scripture, made fecund by the marvellous activity of the Holy Spirit, has produced or contains in its womb. For if at times we assert by a process of reasoning a conclusion which we cannot explicitly cite from the sayings of Scripture or demonstrate from the bare wording, still it is by using Scripture that we know in the following way whether the affirmation should be accepted or rejected. If the conclusion is reached by straightforward reasoning and Scripture in no way contradicts it, then (since just as Scripture opposes no truth so too it abets no falsehood) by the very fact that it does not deny what is inferred on the basis of reason, that conclusion is accepted as authorized by Scripture. But if Scripture indubitably opposes our understanding, even though our reasoning appears to us to be impregnable, still it ought not to be believed to be substantiated by any truth at all. It is when Sacred Scripture either clearly affirms or in no wise denies it, that it gives support to the authority of any reasoned conclusion' (*De Concordia* 3.6 in *Anselm of Canterbury: the Major Works* (ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 460).

'Naturalism' is 'the recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described'. Naturalism therefore involves

the ‘abandonment of the goal of a first philosophy prior to natural science’. (W. V. Quine, *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1981), p. 21)

Thesis Two. To deny the usefulness of natural theology is to deny Scriptural affirmations

Psalm 19
Romans 1:16ff

Thesis Three. To deny the usefulness of natural theology is to remove the possibility of establishing common ground with unbelievers

Kavin Rowe: ‘whatever the merits of larger theories about a theologically or experientially based natural theology, they cannot be earned on the basis of a close reading of Acts 17. Paul’s Areopagus speech is not a paean of the Greek intellectual or spiritual achievement. It is instead the presentation of an alternative pattern of life’ (C. Kavin Rowe, ‘The Grammar of Life: The Areopagus Speech and Pagan Tradition’, *New Testament Studies* 57, pp. 31-50, quoting from p. 35; see also his *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 27-41).
1 Cor. 1.18ff – ?!

Thesis Four. To deny natural theology is to deny a place for apologetics

1 Peter 3.15

Thesis Five. To deny the usefulness of natural theology is to deprive believers of a means of supporting their faith

Anselm: ‘... as if I should think that the strength of the Christian faith needs the help of my defence. Indeed, if I, a despicable little man, were to attempt to write anything to so many holy and wise persons existing everywhere in order to strengthen the foundation of Christian faith, as if the faith should need my defence, I could of course be judged presumptuous and be perceived as someone to be laughed at... Therefore, if I have in this letter argued about the strength of our faith, it is not in order to confirm the faith (Anselm, *de Incarnatione Verbi*, 1 in *Anselm of Canterbury: the Major Works* (ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 234-5).

Barth: ‘By “natural theology” I mean every (positive *or* negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, i.e. to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture’ (Karl Barth, ‘No!’, in Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology* (1946), pp. 74-5, italics original).