



Natural Theology

Rodney D. Holder

Summary

Natural theology is concerned with what we can know about God purely by being human and thinking about the world, apart from any special revelation, and science has often been a resource for this discipline. In the twentieth century its validity as an enterprise of theology proper has been seriously questioned. However, if there is natural theology in the Bible, it would seem to be legitimate after all.¹

A Brief History of Natural Theology

A typical definition of natural theology is given by John Macquarrie: “Natural theology is the knowledge of God (and perhaps also of related topics, such as the immortality of the soul) accessible to all rational human beings without recourse to any special or supposedly supernatural revelation.”² Natural theology is an area of intellectual enquiry with a long, if chequered history, dating back at least to the era of classical Greek thought. Within Christian theology the expression *theologia naturalis* seems to have been first used by St Augustine, in commenting on the insights of classical philosophers.³

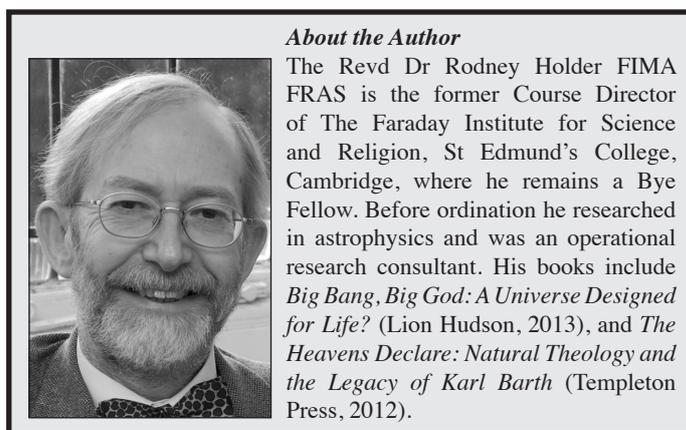
St Thomas Aquinas, for example, thought we could know that God exists from human reason alone:

“The truths about God which St Paul says we can know by our natural powers of reasoning—that God exists, for example—are not numbered among the articles of faith, but are presupposed to them. ...God’s effects, therefore, can serve to demonstrate that God exists, even though they cannot help us to know him comprehensively for what he is.”⁴

Hence, for Aquinas, we can know that God exists but we cannot know what God is in himself unless he reveals himself to us. And the Christian revelation informs us that God is Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

At the time of the reformation John Calvin made a similar distinction. Each human being possesses what he calls a *sensus divinitatis*, a sense of the divine. However, for Calvin as for Aquinas the far more important knowledge of God, simply than knowing that there is a Creator, is that which is specially revealed in Scripture, for it is the knowledge of God as Redeemer, in Christ, which secures our salvation.⁵

Natural knowledge of God could be construed as an immediate impression of God’s existence, power and majesty, coming from simply gazing in awe at the heavens. However,



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in the more academic context, natural theology has been about providing reasons and arguments for belief in God. The classical cosmological and design arguments are examples. The cosmological argument says that everything which exists has a cause for its existence. Therefore there is a cause for the universe’s existence. The design argument appeals to the ordered structure of the universe as requiring explanation. The merits of different forms of these arguments have been the subject of philosophical debate for centuries.

From Aquinas to William Paley in the nineteenth century there was a subtle shift in natural theology. Aquinas gave general arguments whereas the scientific revolution brought in arguments based on the particular. In his influential book, *Natural Theology, or Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802), Paley gave the famous example of a watch found on a heath. The watch, which possessed great intricacy, was obviously designed. How much more so the eye observing it? This form of the argument, but not the form Aquinas deployed, is generally considered to have been undermined by Darwin, who showed how the eye could in principle arise from natural processes. The more general form of natural theology is very much alive today, especially for example with regard to the fine-tuning of the universe in cosmology.⁶ However, the intention of this paper

¹ A much fuller account of the subject is given in Rodney D. Holder, *The Heavens Declare: Natural Theology and the Legacy of Karl Barth* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2012).

² John Macquarrie in Alister McGrath (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p 402.

³ St Augustine, *The City of God*, Book VIII.

⁴ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 2, 2.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II.

⁶ See Rodney D. Holder, “Is the Universe Designed,” Faraday Paper no. 10, 2007.

is not to discuss the merits of individual arguments, but rather to discuss the principle of whether natural theology is a valid Christian pursuit at all.

For Aquinas and others, natural theology has been a preliminary for revealed theology. In this tradition the task of natural theology is seen as removing barriers to belief and providing good reasons for belief in God. It provides the groundwork for the more specific and important belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Arguably, however, the division between natural and revealed theology is a somewhat artificial one, since some prior justification is required for what is purported to be revelation.

The Rejection of Natural Theology: Karl Barth

In the twentieth century the idea that we should gain any knowledge at all from natural theology was challenged by the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Barth studied theology in Germany before the First World War and held university posts in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. He was a pillar of the Confessing Church, which stood out against the Nazi régime, before returning to Switzerland in 1935 when he was dismissed from his chair at the University of Bonn because he refused to take the oath of allegiance to Hitler. Modern theologians such as Thomas Torrance and John Webster rank Barth as one of the greatest theologians of all time, Torrance putting him alongside Athanasius, Augustine, Luther and Calvin.

Barth's starting point is his desire to deny all knowledge of God apart from God's own gracious revelation of himself in Christ, which is made known to us in Scripture. By God's grace alone (*sola gratia*) can we know him: we cannot know him by our own efforts. This divine revelation is a miracle. In contrast, "Natural theology is the doctrine of a union of man with God existing outside God's revelation in Jesus Christ." Furthermore, "As the content of proclamation and theology it can have no place at all. It can be treated only as non-existent. In this sense, therefore, it must be excised without mercy."⁷ Barth writes, "The logic of the matter demands that, even if we only lend our little finger to natural theology, there necessarily follows the denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ."⁸

Natural Theology and the Bible

Barth is correct that God's self-revelation in Christ as attested in Holy Scripture is primary. The absolute centrality of the person of Jesus Christ to Barth is deeply impressive. In the crisis of the church struggle in Germany in the Nazi period, perhaps only a theology so unequivocally Christ-centred could have been effective. However, Barth surely goes too far in claiming that there is no such thing as natural theology. God as Creator has left evidence of himself in the natural world. Scripture itself attests as much, and if there is natural theology in Scripture that would appear to nullify Barth's argument. The Biblical scholar who has done most to show this is James Barr in his *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*.

As Barr points out, Barth's insistence that "the church and human salvation [are] founded on the Word of God alone, on God's revelation in Jesus Christ, as it is attested in the Scripture"⁹ is meant to imply the denial of all natural

theology.¹⁰ In response Barr writes, "But if the Bible accepted or implied natural theology this argument falls to pieces: the Word of God, as attested in the scriptures, must then *include* natural theology as part of revelation, or as the background to it, or as an implication of it or mode through which it is communicated."¹¹

In Acts 17, Paul delivers a sermon on the Areopagus in Athens, which arguably constitutes the clearest example of natural theology in all of Scripture. He first commends his hearers. He even identifies the "unknown god" (v23) that they worship with the God whom he, Paul, proclaims. Evidently the "God of the philosophers" is "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." He says, "From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him" (vv 26–27, NRSV). Most remarkably, he quotes Greek poets, Epimenides of Crete ("In him we live and move and have our being," v28) and Aratus of Cilicia ("For we too are his offspring," v28), in support. Paul seems to be building on what thinking Greeks knew about God from their philosophical reflection, contemplation, and experience.

One of the most famous disputes in theology took place in 1934 between Barth and his erstwhile colleague Emil Brunner. Brunner wrote a piece called "Nature and Grace" arguing that there was an *Anknüpfungspunkt*, a point of contact, in human nature for God's grace to latch on to. Barth's response was simply headed "*Nein!*" But the Acts 17 passage strongly suggests that there *is* a point of contact for the gospel. Of course, Paul does go on to call his Greek listeners to repentance, because God has hitherto "overlooked" the idolatry stemming from an inadequate grasp of the nature of God (v30). Their natural knowledge of God is inadequate for salvation, but it does point to God.

Barr concludes from the Areopagus sermon that "Paul's approach as reported in Acts is entirely contrary to what any Barthian approach could have been."¹² Further, "There can be no doubt that it depends on, supports, and involves some sort of natural theology."¹³

In expounding Acts 17, Barth's tendency is to emphasize the ignorance of the Athenians and to deny any continuity with their previous knowledge: "If one of them now knows about the God proclaimed to them by Paul, it is definitely not in confirmation of what he knew before, perhaps as a member of the sect that worshipped the unknown God, or as a reader of Aratus. It is in a quite new knowledge of his previous complete ignorance."¹⁴ However, it would seem to be a more straightforward reading of the passage to say that Paul does indeed build on the knowledge they had. And if "the stoic and epicurean philosophies [mentioned in v18] and all other philosophies are at an end," as Barth avers,¹⁵ why is that Paul says nothing at all to that effect? Thus Barr regards the arguments of Barth "as entirely invalid, because they do not constitute *exegesis* of the Areopagus speech at all: they pick out the few aspects that can appear to favour the Barthian dogmatic position, and they simply ignore the tenor of the total argument and its content."¹⁶

¹⁰ James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991 Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 19–20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 123.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁶ Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, 24.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 170.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation*, Gifford Lectures Delivered in 1937 and 1938 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 8–9.

In Romans 1:19–20, Paul asserts that “what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” In Romans 2:14 he says, “When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively (literally, by nature, φύσει [physei]) what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves.”

Barr supports the view that Romans 1 and 2 contain natural theology, although this is less clear than in the Areopagus case. Exegetes such as Cranfield and Barrett argue that the main point of Romans 1 is God’s judgment, and people are without excuse. They *could* know God, but instead turn to idols and perversion. There is indeed no excuse, and Paul makes clear that God’s revelation in Christ is essential for salvation. However, that God reveals himself in the created world, and that therefore there is at least some natural knowledge of God, seems an inescapable inference from the passage.

Barr notes similarities between Acts 17, where there is definitely natural theology, and Romans 1–2. In some ways Acts goes further, God guiding the nations so that they might “feel after him and find him,” (v27) and Paul citing the Greek poets with approval. But in other ways Romans is more explicit: for example, in spelling out what is knowable about God—and indeed that “they knew God” (Rom 1:21)—and in using the highly significant word φύσις [physis], “nature.”

Paul’s argument in Romans strongly resembles an argument in Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha which is quite clearly of a natural theological kind. In fact Paul is probably drawing on Wisdom at this point. Thus Wisdom 13:1-9 argues from creation to knowledge of the Creator, appealing to the findings of Greek science: “For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator . . . for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?” (vv 5, 9) Surely the findings of science, especially of the vastness of the universe, enhance rather than detract from our perception of the glory of God. And Paul’s argument that instead of worshipping God they worshipped idols, and that led to moral degeneracy, is also foreshadowed in Wisdom (e.g. Wisdom 14:12, 22-29).

The Old Testament also appeals to the natural world as revealing God’s glory. For example, in Psalm 19:1 we read, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.” Moreover, there is a universal communication of God’s glory throughout the creation: “Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Ps 19:2–4a). God’s revelation in creation is complemented by his revelation in the law, which the psalm goes on to extol: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul . . .” (Ps 19:7ff.).

Barth argues that there is a need to look at Psalm 19 in the context of the Bible as a whole, so even conceding that the psalm contains natural theology, this is nonetheless overwhelmed by the biblical emphasis on revelation.¹⁷ However, as Barr points out, nobody is saying that there is nothing but natural theology in the Bible, or, one might add, that natural theology is primary. Moreover, at least some aspects of the law of Moses are

knowable through reason, as is shown by their commonality with other ancient law codes. In particular, there is the remarkable commonality of Mosaic law with the much earlier law code of Hammurabi.

Hammurabi was the sixth Amorite king of Old Babylonia and reigned from 1792 to 1750 BC. He promulgated his famous law code at the beginning of his reign and it contains clauses such as the following:¹⁸

195: “If a son has struck his father, they shall cut off his hand.”

196: “If a seignior has destroyed the eye of a member of the aristocracy, they shall destroy his eye.” [198: if of a commoner he shall pay one mina of silver; 199: if of someone’s slave, half his value.]

200: “If a seignior has knocked out a tooth of a seignior of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth.” [201: if of a commoner, he shall pay one-third of a mina of silver.]

Compare the Old Testament:

Exodus 21:15: “Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death.”

Leviticus 24:19: “Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” [Exodus 21:26, 27: for the eye or tooth of his slave, the slave shall go free.]

These parallels between what God commands Israel in the Pentateuch and ethical insights, presumably gleaned from nature, in the pagan world would seem to contradict Barth’s point that “When the witnesses in the Old Testament call upon God to bear witness, they do not appeal . . . to a God whom they expect to speak to men in some other way than in the history of Israel itself and as such”.¹⁹ Of course it is the same God who speaks through the history of Israel *and* nature.

Further instances of natural theology include Ecclesiasticus in the Apocrypha (e.g. ch. 38, where God gives medicine and physicians, “that he may be glorified in his marvellous works”), and in the canonical wisdom literature. Just to give one brief example, the instruction “Go to the ant, you lazybones” (Prov 6:6) represents the gleaning of a moral lesson from observation of nature. It is not an appeal to the law of Moses revealed on Mount Sinai, but wisdom open to all.

The book of Ecclesiastes looks remarkably like philosophy; and indeed some have seen commonality with elements of Greek philosophical schools such as Stoicism and Epicureanism. Here again, then, there is appeal to universal experience, and commonality with other religious traditions. John J. Collins (Professor of Old Testament, Yale Divinity School), specifically commenting on the wisdom literature, makes the point well:

“There are certain fundamental aspects of the sages’ approach to reality which are common to natural theology in all ages. Specifically the sages attempted to discern the religious dimension of common, universal human experience without appeal to special revelation or the unique experience of one people. This religious dimension was correlated with the distinctively Israelite tradition but it was not subordinated to it. The history and law of Israel did not replace universal wisdom, although the sages claimed that they did complement and illustrate it.”²⁰

¹⁸ James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 163-180.

¹⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 100.

²⁰ John J. Collins, “The Biblical Precedent for Natural Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45, no. 1 (1977), B: 35–67. Quoted in Barr, *op. cit.*, 91–92.

¹⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 101.

It would seem that there is an inherent contradiction in Barth's position here. God's self-revelation in Scripture is all that matters, yet Scripture itself asserts that there is a knowledge of God to be obtained from observing nature.

What we learn from nature may indeed only give us an incomplete and inadequate picture of God. Nevertheless, natural theology leads us not only to a Creator in the first place, but to a Creator with certain attributes—for example, majesty and power—that are associated with the biblical God.²¹ Arguably the universality of the laws of nature—that is, their applicability across all of space and time—in addition to an appeal to simplicity, would lead one to infer, with Richard Swinburne, that there is only one God.²² This view, of course, needs to be supplemented and enriched by our biblical knowledge of God—for example, God is personal and is related to the world as the Triune God, and is not just some distant Prime Mover—but the view of natural theology is not wrong in itself.

Following on from Barth

Karl Barth has been massively influential on modern theology. The distinguished Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance, mentioned earlier, was an ardent disciple. However, Torrance proposed a different way of thinking about natural theology. He tells us that he put this to Barth when the latter was on his deathbed and received his seal of approval. It is a very different take on natural theology from the traditional one, but has gained considerable support.

Torrance connects the place of geometry in physics with the place of natural theology relative to revealed theology. Just as Einstein brought geometry into physics through general relativity, so natural theology must be brought within theology proper. He writes:

“In physics, this means that geometry cannot be pursued as an axiomatic deductive science detached from actual knowledge of physical processes or be developed as an independent science antecedent to physics, but must be pursued in indissoluble unity with physics. ... In theology, this means that natural theology cannot be undertaken apart from actual knowledge of the living God as a prior conceptual system on its own. ... Rather must it be undertaken in an integrated unity with positive theology in which it plays an indispensable part in our inquiry and understanding of God.”²³

It is certainly an imaginative use of an analogy from physics, the subsuming of geometry within physics brought about by general relativity being analogous to the subsuming

of natural theology within a prior dogmatic framework. For Torrance, natural theology only tells us something about the God we already know, and it cannot precede revealed theology.

However, there is a problem with this analogy which can be illustrated by use of a further analogy from the world of mathematics. I am a teacher of mathematics, and I know that Pythagoras's theorem is true. My class, however, with a few exceptions, does not know this. I draw a right-angled triangle on the blackboard, squares on the three sides, and then a few more lines. From the premises of Euclidean geometry, and what the whole class knows about congruent triangles, and how to calculate areas of triangles and rectangles, I prove Pythagoras's theorem. The point is that the theorem is true for everybody, not just for me. Those who did not know it before the lesson now do, assuming they follow the logic, and those who did know it beforehand, perhaps by having seen some examples and not found any counterexamples, have their belief reinforced by a rigorous proof.

Arguments in natural theology are usually inductive, rather than deductive as in mathematics. That is, they proceed from the evidence under consideration to the best or most likely explanation for that evidence, rather than aim for a demonstrative proof. Nevertheless, they also proceed by rational argument. A Christian will believe the result of the argument, either because he or she knows the argument itself or, more likely, for other good reasons (for example, to do with revelation, or his or her own religious experience). A non-Christian will not believe the result of the argument beforehand, but may be persuaded on hearing the argument. However, there is always a way of avoiding the conclusion of an inductive or probabilistic argument; it can never be absolutely compelling, and the sceptic may reject the argument itself, or have other reasons for rejecting the conclusion unrelated to the argument. Metaphysical argument is much looser than the logic of mathematical proof, even though there is a valid comparison to be made.

Modern, sophisticated metaphysical arguments, such as that from cosmological fine-tuning, certainly take one beyond the natural theology of the Bible. The latter is more like an immediate perception that there must be a God behind the universe—“the heavens are telling the glory of God”—a perception which is universally available. Fine-tuning arguments and the like can be seen as reinforcing that, or giving reasons why that perception is valid. They may prepare the way for someone to go on and examine the more particular claims of Christianity. In alternative phraseology, general revelation precedes and prepares for special revelation.

The scientist pondering the reasons for the world's intelligibility, which renders the scientific enterprise possible, may find the best explanation within a theistic framework. A creative Mind behind the universe is certainly a rational inference from its existence and intelligibility.

²¹ For a helpful article, see David Bentley Hart, “We need to talk about God,” *Church Times*, no. 7978, 12 February 2016, 19-20.

²² Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 145-47.

²³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969; paperback edition, 1997), 69-70. See also, in some detail, Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Belfast: Christian Journals, 1980), chap. 4, “The Transformation of Natural Theology,” where he cites Barth in support of a natural theology included within revealed theology).

The Faraday Papers

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