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Natural Knowledge of God and the Trinity

Roland Ziegler

Throughout the greater part of the history of Christianity, the natural knowledge of God – a knowledge of God derived from nature, history, and man outside and beyond the biblical story of God's interaction with the world – cohabitated peacefully with the revealed knowledge of God in the minds of Christians and theological textbooks.

This peaceful coexistence between the natural and revealed knowledges of God, however, was shattered in modernity. The first attack came from the side of the natural knowledge of God. This alone was seen by the English Deists and their followers as the true knowledge of God, whereas the Christian concept of the triune God was viewed as a departure from the true, simple, and natural knowledge of God. The interaction with different religions, especially the impression left by ethically high-standing religions, shattered the conviction of the singularity and superiority of Christianity. All religions seemed to contain elements of truth, and these were identical with the natural knowledge of God: There is a God; he cares, and he is an ethical being to which man is responsible. As Alexander Pope put it in "The Universal Prayer":

Father of all! In every age
In every clime adored,
By saint, by savage, and by sage,
Jehovah, Jove, or Lord!

Thou great First Cause, least understood,
Who all my sense confined,
To know but this, that Thou art good,
And that myself am blind;

Yet gave me, in this dark estate,
To see the good from ill;
And, binding nature fast in fate,
Left free the human will.¹

¹ Alexander Pope, *Collected Poems* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1924), 216.

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Another attack on the unity of the natural knowledge of God with the Trinity came with the rise of modern science, which rejected theological thinking by adopting instead a methodical atheism.² The existence of God, known by nature, rapidly lost plausibility. The massive atheism that started to spread in the nineteenth century and continued to spread in Europe in the twentieth century seemed to disprove any concept that man can evidentially know God.³

The peaceful coexistence between the natural and revealed knowledges of God also came under attack from a theological point of view. Karl Barth saw an enemy and a deadly disease of Christian theology in any concept of a natural theology, manifesting its poisonous fruits in the collaboration of the so-called German Christians with the National Socialists in Germany in the 1930s.

In exploring these questions, we will first investigate a classical statement of the natural knowledge of God and the Trinity by Thomas Aquinas and then look at the debate between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth. We will then try to articulate a Lutheran position by first referring to the Scriptures and then listening to the Confessions and the Lutheran fathers. Finally, we will draw some conclusions for the challenges we face today.

I. Natural Knowledge and the Trinity: A Classical Position

According to Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), God is known by natural reason and by revelation: “There is a twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God. Some truths about God exceed all the ability of human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune. But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like.”⁴

² For further evidence see Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). For the general intellectual history that led to the modern crisis of Christianity see Paul Hazard, *The European Mind 1680–1715* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1963).

³ See James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith. Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book One: God (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1955), 63 [*Summa contra gentiles*, I,3,2.]. For the Latin edition, see *Summa contra gentiles seu de veritate catholicae fidei. Impressio XVIII stereotypa* (Taurini: Marietta, 1927), 2–3: “Est autem in his, quae de Deo confitemur, duplex veritatis modus. Quaedam namque vera sunt de Deo, quae omnem facultatem humanae rationis

In his *Summa Theologiae* Part 1, question 2, Aquinas discusses the question of God's existence and then further differentiates this question into three points: "1. is it self-evident that there is a God? 2. can it be made evident? 3. is there a God?"⁵

The first question asks if there is an innate idea of God, such that human beings simply have to start to think and will find in themselves the concept of God. Three arguments are adduced in favor of such a position. The first Aquinas founds upon the argument of John of Damascus, that "the awareness that God exists is implanted by nature in everybody."⁶ The second argument is the ontological argument: Whoever thinks the word "God" (defined as "that than which nothing greater can be meant") must also think that God exists—and that not only in thought, but also in fact. The third argument is the existence of truth: Since there is truth, and any rejection is self-contradictory, there must be ultimate truth.

Aquinas, however, rejects this *a priori* argumentation for the existence of God. Against John of Damascus, he states that in man there is not implanted an idea of God but only a desire for happiness, which finds its fulfillment in God but remains so vague that human beings can mistake it and search for happiness, for example, in money. Against Anselm he maintains that the definition of God as "something than which nothing greater can be thought" is not a common definition of God, and that the transition from the fact that we have to think that God exists to the fact that God actually exists is not logically conclusive. Aquinas also rejects the idea that the existence of truth implies the existence of a first truth.

Aquinas then comes to the opposite position: God's existence cannot be made evident—the fideistic position. Again, three arguments in favor of this position are listed: first, a proof for the existence of God is impossible because God's existence is an article of faith; second, to demonstrate the existence of God would presuppose that we can define the essence of God, which is patently impossible; and third, a proof for the existence of God could only come as a conclusion from the works of God to the creator, that

excedunt, ut Deum esse trinum et unum. Quaedam vero sunt, ad quae ratio naturalis peritingere potest, sicut est Deum esse, Deum esse unum, et alia hujusmodi."

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 2 (Blackfriars, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 5; [*Summa theologiae* 1,2].

⁶ John of Damascus, *De fide Orthodoxa*, 1,1. PG 94,789; In English see, John of Damascus, "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899).

is, from effects to their cause. Since God and his effects are not on the same plane, but rather creator and creation are of an infinite ontological difference, such a concluding back to God seems impossible.⁷

These objections are first answered by a recourse to Scripture: The witness of Paul in Romans seems to contradict such a fideist position. Philosophically the foundation is laid by affirming that any effect presupposes a cause, and the least we can say—but we can say it—is that there exists a cause, even if we could say no more. The first objection is countered by a recourse to Romans 1:19–20: since Paul says that certain things can be known about God by the power of reasoning, the existence of God is not strictly speaking an article of faith; it rather presupposes faith. “For faith presupposes natural knowledge, just as grace does nature and all perfections that which they perfect.”⁸

Against the argument that a proof demands a definition of the essence, Aquinas contends that this mistakes the way we think. In the words of a commentator: “first, we know *y* to exist; secondly, we use the word ‘*x*’ to mean *cause of y*; thirdly, we demonstrate that *x* exists (cf. note *b*); fourthly, we define *x* (that is present how the word ‘*x*’ is used as a declaration of what *x* is); fifthly, we then demonstrate why certain other truths hold of *x* (cf note *a*).⁹

Having thereby rejected both positions—that no proof for the existence of God is necessary because there exists an *a priori* knowledge of God, and that no proof for the existence of God is possible—Aquinas continues by demonstrating the existence of God *a posteriori*, that is from the effects of God. He does this with five arguments: the famous five ways. The basis of these proofs is the relationship of cause and effect. There is, as stated, a certain relation between cause and effect, a certain proportion or analogy that enables us to conclude from the created order to its source, the creator.

What do these five ways then look like?¹⁰ The first way is based on change. Everything that is changed or moved is changed by another thing and not by itself, there is no true *automobile*. Since there is no infinite regress possible, there must be a first cause of change which is not changed by itself, and this is “what everybody understands by God.”

⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, 9 [*Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 2, art. 2].

⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, 11 [*Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 2, art. 2, ad 2]: *Sic enim fides praesupponit cognitionem naturalem sicut gratia naturam et ut perfectio perfectibile.*

⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, 11; emphasis original.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, 12–19 [*Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 2, art. 3].

The second way is based on causation. Everything is caused by something else, and since there is no break in this line, there must be a first cause, and this cause is God.

The third way argues from necessity. There are beings that exist contingently; that is, they can exist but do not have to exist: "we find them springing up and dying away, thus sometimes not." Now, there must exist more than contingent beings: "if everything need not be, once upon a time there was nothing." There must be one thing that exists necessarily, which is the cause of the contingent beings.

The fourth way is based on gradation. In things we find differences—some are more good, more true, more noble, some are less. Since there is this hierarchy, there must be something which is "the truest and best and most noble of things, and hence the most fully in being". "There is something therefore which causes in all other things their being, their goodness, and whatever perfection they have. And this we call 'God'."

The fifth way is the argument from the order in nature. Since the created things obey natural laws, and their behavior "will practically always turn out well," there must be an intelligence behind it.

But reason can establish more than just the existence of God. It can also say something about the properties of God. Though man cannot have any direct knowledge of the divine essence but relies on what his senses perceive, one can come to a concept of a being that actually is beyond sensory experience. Through the threefold way—the negative way, the positive way, and the way of eminence—reason can make a true statement about what God is like.¹¹

¹¹ "The knowledge that is natural to us has its source in the senses and extends just so far as it can be led by sensible things; from these, however, our understanding cannot reach to the divine essence. Sensible creatures are effects of God which are less than typical of the power of their cause, so knowing them does not lead us to understand the whole power of God and thus we do not see his essence. They are nevertheless effects depending from a cause, and so we can at least be led from them to know of God that he exists and that he has whatever must belong to the first cause of all things which is beyond all that is caused. Thus we know about his relation to creatures – that he is the cause of them all; about the difference between him and them – that nothing created is in him and that his lack of such things is not a deficiency in him but due to his transcendence." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 3, 41 [S Th I, 12, 12 resp.].

The first method is the method of negation.¹²

For, by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing *what it is*. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing *what it is not*. Furthermore, we approach nearer to a knowledge of God according as through our intellect we are able to remove more and more things from Him.¹³

Through this method, Aquinas shows that God is eternal (*Summa Contra Gentiles* I,15), that there is not passive potency in God (I,16), that there is no matter in God (I,17), that there is no composition in God, which is otherwise positively called the simplicity of God (I,18), that there is nothing violent or unnatural in God (I,19), and that God is not a body (I,20). God is infinite and perfect and so on. The way of affirmation, or causality, however, sees God as the efficient cause of everything. Since the efficient cause contains in itself every perfection that is in the effect, God possesses all perfections that are in the creatures. The way of eminence finally deduces from the finite perfections of creation by way of an analogy that God possesses infinite perfections.

It is not our task now to engage in a detailed discussion about the value of these proofs or the three ways. Important for our purpose is only that Aquinas understands Romans 1 in such a way that everybody can come to the knowledge of the existence of God. This knowledge consists in the knowledge of God as the first mover, the first cause, the highest and noblest thing, and the law-giver of nature. Therefore anybody can have a concept of the true God. How is this then related to the Trinity? As quoted before from Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Christianity presupposes this knowledge. It is a better and more complete knowledge of God, but it includes the natural knowledge.¹⁴ Here we truly have a two-tier model of the knowledge of God.

¹² Thomas follows here a tradition that started with Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite [*De divinis nominibus*, VII, 3; PG 3,869]; see Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 108–109.

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 96f. [*Summa contra gentiles*, I,14,2]; emphasis original.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 3, 41; [S. Th. I,12,13, resp.]. "By grace we have a more perfect knowledge of God than we have by natural reason. The latter depends on two things: images derived from the sensible world and the natural intellectual light by which we make abstract intelligible concepts from these images. In both these respects

II. The Brunner-Barth Dialogue

The history of Protestant theology in the twentieth century was decisively shaped by the new beginning Karl Barth inaugurated with the publication of his *Commentary on Romans* in 1919. Barth started a theological program that tried to avoid the errors of liberal Protestantism, which, according to Barth, had made Christianity a prisoner of culture and, therefore, impotent to voice the distinctive doctrines of Christianity. He rejected a predominance of epistemological questions, the quest to harmonize Christianity and culture, and the strong interest in how Christianity can be communicated as an anthropocentric approach to theology. Barth accused the current Protestant theology of taking up the question: "How can this be made understandable?" instead of simply saying what Christianity had to say. Such a question sought to mediate, which thereby arrogated the work of God to man. This attitude, moreover, destroyed the possibility to say what God actually said. The beginning of Barth's theology was therefore viewed by the Protestant theological establishment as the assault of a new form of anti-intellectualistic barbarism that simply brushed aside important questions instead of facing them.

Barth was not alone in this new beginning, which soon came to be called *dialectical theology*. While Barth was pastor in Safenwil, he was in continuous exchange with Eduard Thurneysen. In Germany, Friedrich Gogarten and Rudolf Bultmann were part of this loose movement. The most influential dogmatician, besides Barth, was Emil Brunner. He had published a monograph on Schleiermacher in which he sharply critiqued this nineteenth-century church father, demanding a new beginning that started with revelation instead of man.

Dialectical theology was not at all homogenous, and in 1934 a controversy arose between Barth and Brunner that caused an insurmountable split. This division occurred on the question of natural theology, one of the classic controversies of Protestant theology in the twentieth century.¹⁵

human knowledge is helped by the revelation of grace. The light of grace strengthens the intellectual light and at the same time prophetic visions provide us with God-given images which are better suited to express divine things than those we receive naturally from the sensible world."

¹⁵ For the historical background, see Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His life from letters and autobiographical texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 248-253. The theological

Brunner published a booklet entitled *Nature and Grace: A Contribution to the Discussion with Karl Barth*. In this booklet, Brunner, after giving a short account of the position of Barth, summarizes his own position in six theses.¹⁶ First, the image of God has been lost through the fall as far as the material image is concerned, that is original will and therefore free will. The formal image of God (i.e., that which makes man human), however, is retained. This formal image includes the superiority of man in creation, his subjectivity – namely that he is a rational creature having a capacity for words – and his responsibility. Brunner, therefore, essentially rejects the idea of a remnant of the image of God: man is a sinner through and through, but man remains a person.

Second, since the world is God's creation, it has the imprint of his maker. "Therefore the creation of the world is at the same time a revelation, a self-communication of God."¹⁷ Sin did not destroy but only adversely affects the ability of man to perceive this revelation. This is also true regarding the "consciousness of responsibility." "Only because men somehow know the will of God are they able to sin."¹⁸ There are two sources of revelation, Brunner does not question this. What is in question, however, is the relation between these two: universal revelation and revelation in Christ. Universal revelation is obviously not a salvific revelation.

According to St. Paul the revelation of God in his creation would be sufficient for every one to know therein the Creator according to his majesty and wisdom. But sin dulls man's sight so much that instead of God he 'knows' or 'fancies' gods. We may correctly characterize the objective and subjective factors thus: man misrepresents the revelation of God in creation and turns it into idols.¹⁹

background is extensively treated in Christoph Gestrinch, *Neuzeitliches Denken und die Spaltung der dialektischen Theologie. Zur Frage der natürlichen Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977). Brunner's and Barth's pamphlets have been reprinted in Walther Fürst, ed., "Dialektische Theologie" in *Scheidung und Bewährung 1933-1936. Aufsätze, Gutachten und Erklärungen* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1966), 169-258. They were published in an English translation as *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth* (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1946).

¹⁶ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 175ff; *Natural Theology*, 22ff.

¹⁷ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 177; *Natural Theology*, 25.

¹⁸ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 177; *Natural Theology*, 25.

¹⁹ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 179; *Natural Theology*, 26.

The Christian nevertheless can see God in creation and therefore is informed by a double revelation. "Only the Christian, *i.e.* the man who stands within the revelation of Christ, has the true natural knowledge of God."²⁰

Third, there exists a general or preserving grace operative in the world through which God preserves his fallen creation; and fourth, to this preserving grace, moreover, belong those ordinances which are a constant factor of human life. This includes the orders of creation, especially matrimony and the state. They are only correctly understood in faith, but they are created and maintained by instinct and reason. Natural man, although not able to understand them truly in their relation to God, still can know that they are "necessary and somehow holy and are by him respected as such."²¹

Fifth, Brunner develops his famous doctrine of the *Anknüpfungspunkt*, the point of contact. "No one who agrees that only human subjects but not stocks and stones can receive the Word of God and the Holy Spirit can deny that there is such a thing as a point of contact for the divine grace of redemption."²² This point of contact is the formal image of God, that is as a person who has a capacity for words and is responsible. Responsibility, in particular, namely that man is a moral being who knows good from evil, is absolutely necessary to be able to hear the call to repentance. But the natural knowledge of the law, the will of God, is dialectical. "Natural man knows them and yet does not know them. If he did not know them, he would not be human; if he really knew them, he would not be a sinner Without knowledge of God there can be no sin: sin is always 'in the sight of God.' In sin there can be no knowledge of God, for the true knowledge of God is the abolition of sin."²³ But the point of contact is not only the formal image of man.

What the natural man knows of God, of the law and of his own dependence upon God, may be very confused and distorted. But even so it is the necessary, indispensable point of contact for divine grace. This is also proved by the fact that on the whole the New Testament did

²⁰ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 180; *Natural Theology*, 27.

²¹ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 183; *Natural Theology*, 31.

²² Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 183; *Natural Theology*, 31.

²³ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 184; *Natural Theology*, 31f; emphasis original.

not create new words, but uses those that were created by the religious consciousness of the pagans.²⁴

Finally, therefore, what Scripture has to say about the death of the old man always refers to the material side of human nature, not to the formal. The formal personality continues in the regeneration, the revivification.

In the final chapter, Brunner discusses the significance of natural theology for theology and the church. Since theological ethics is determined by the concept of the orders of creation and Christian love, natural theology has implications for approaching this topic. A rejection of the orders of creation leads to "invincible individualism."²⁵ Natural theology is important for dogmatics because it enables us to speak about God through analogy.²⁶ Brunner defends here the *analogia entis*, which Barth rejected as an "invention of the Anti-Christ." Finally, the practical importance of natural theology ultimately lies in the fact that the church's proclamation rests on the remnant of the image of God, which makes this message comprehensible. The fact that man is a responsible being is also important for Christians' interaction with unbelievers.²⁷

Karl Barth's reply, tersely titled *No!*, was not favorable toward Brunner's theological interest and argumentation. After his first chapter, "Angry introduction," where he rejects Brunner's conciliatory rhetoric to soften the theological difference between them, Barth defines natural theology as "every (positive or negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, that is 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."²⁸ He sees his position as so fundamentally opposed to natural theology that he even rejects any treatment of it as an independent topic. Though Brunner wants to maintain *sola scriptura* and a free and sovereign grace, Barth thinks that Brunner, by developing a natural theology, actually gives up both. He gives up *sola scriptura* because knowledge of God is now available outside of Scripture.

²⁴ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 185; *Natural Theology*, 32f.

²⁵ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 201; *Natural Theology*, 52.

²⁶ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 202–204; *Natural Theology*, 53–55.

²⁷ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 204–207; *Natural Theology*, 56–60.

²⁸ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 214; *Natural Theology*, 74f; emphasis original.

No, when he speaks of the God who can be and is 'somehow' known through creation, Brunner does unfortunately mean the one true God, the triune creator of heaven and earth, who justifies us through Christ and sanctifies us through the Holy Spirit. It is he who is *de facto* known by all men without Christ, without the Holy Spirit, though knowledge of him is distorted and dimmed and darkened by sin, though he is 'misrepresented' and 'turned into idols.'²⁹

Regarding the relationship between these two types of revelation and the status of non-Christian religions, Barth asks: "Is it his opinion that idolatry is but a somewhat imperfect preparatory stage of the service of the true God? Is the function of the revelation of God merely that of leading us from one step to the next within the all-embracing reality of divine revelation?" And regarding *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia*: "And if we really do know the true God from his creation without Christ and without the Holy Spirit—if this is so, how can it be said that the *imago* is materially 'entirely lost,' that in matters of the proclamation of the Church Scripture is the only norm and that man can do nothing towards his salvation?"³⁰

Regarding Brunner's concept of preserving grace and the ordinances or orders of creation, Barth asks: How is natural man able to come to a true understanding, for example, of marriage, when following instinct and reason? Barth furthermore thinks that Brunner gives up the doctrine of free, sovereign grace when he develops his concept of a point of contact because now grace is again in some way dependent on man; there is some kind of preparation on the side of man. Otherwise, argues Barth, all of Brunner's reflections about the formal image of man, about man as a moral being, and his capability for words (which, by the way, Barth consistently misquotes as "capability for revelation") would be pointless.³¹ Against Brunner's reflection about the possibility and presuppositions of man becoming a Christian, Barth posits the simple proclamation of the Christian message. God himself will create the presupposition so that his message will be understood.³² Brunner has left the new start and become one with the mediating theologians of the nineteenth century, who, instead

²⁹ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 220; *Natural Theology*, 81f.

³⁰ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 220; *Natural Theology*, 82.

³¹ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 220f; *Natural Theology*, 82f.

³² Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 249; *Natural Theology*, 117.

of simply listening to God, listened to man and God, which ultimately means only to man.³³

In summary, Barth rejects any natural theology because it is against *sola scriptura*, because it is against the *sola gratia*, and because it ignores that God is revealed solely in Christ. The God of natural theology, for Barth, is an idol, not the true God.

Barth's rejection of any and every form of natural revelation proved to be very influential for Protestant theology in the twentieth century not only due to the systematic consistency of his position that claimed to know Christ and only Christ in an effort to end all ambiguous "ands" between theology and whatever, or because he was determined to do theology in a thoroughly trinitarian way, but also because of the historical context in which this rejection and condemnation of natural theology was situated. The theme of natural theology stood at the center of the controversy between the so-called German Christians—the church political party that sought to form the Protestant churches in Germany in the image of National Socialism—and their opponents. Very briefly, the German Christians claimed that the rise of Hitler was a providential occasion that, through the revolution of national socialism, God speaks to the German people. They claimed that the ordinances of nation and race are instituted by God and that the church has to respect them—for example, by separating converted Jews and Aryans in the Christian church. Barth was a leading opponent of the German Christians and saw in natural theology the root of the catastrophic development of Protestant Christianity in Germany. His denunciation of any form of natural theology as serving the cause of the German Christians discredited this theological topic for a long time. Only when the shadow of this history waned was a new discussion, at least in Germany, possible.

III. An Attempt to a Solution – Scripture and Confession

The Teaching of Scripture

Even though Thomas Aquinas, Emil Brunner, and Karl Barth were not Lutheran, their respective positions can also be found in the Lutheran Church.³⁴ It is not simply a look into a distant or closer past, or even a look

³³ Fürst, "Dialektische Theologie", 252; *Natural Theology*, 121.

³⁴ For a critical view of the Thomistic approach to natural theology in Lutheranism, see Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, Band I (München: C.H. Beck'sche

beyond fences, rather these men (and of course also other theologians) still form and inform discussions on natural theology among Lutherans. How do we come to an evaluation then? All these radically different positions read and claimed the same Bible as the foundation of their theology. Thus, it is necessary to give a short exposition of some of the classical passages that are quoted in the discussion on natural theology.³⁵

Romans 1: The Natural Knowledge of God as Creator

This passage introduces the first main part of Romans (Rom 1:18–3:20); the purpose of which is to show that Jews and Gentiles are sinners, lacking righteousness before God. In Romans 1:18 and following, Paul wants to show that the Gentiles are without excuses (ἀναπολόγητοι). They cannot claim ignorance as grounds for lenience. The wrath of God has rightfully come upon them. God has revealed himself to the Gentiles. Any interpretation that denies natural revelation does not, in my opinion, do justice to the text. Thus we must strictly see it as revelation, that is, God's action and not some property inherent in nature. An alternative view would be to interpret Paul along Stoic lines. There is a similarity in vocabulary but a difference in theology. The Stoic school of philosophy taught that man can know god because man shares in the Logos. Since they are of one kind, man can know god. While this view is in harmony with the overall pantheistic concept of god in Stoicism, Paul, on the contrary, is maintaining that any knowledge about God is revealed, that is coming from God and not the result of a merely human enterprise.

The content of this revelation is revealed from the beginning of the world through the works of God. Most often, ποιήματα is translated with "what is made," and is understood as a knowledge derived from creation along the same line as the cosmological or teleological argument for the existence of God.³⁶

What, then, is actually revealed? Paul summarizes them as God's invisible attributes (ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ). By stressing God's invisibility in verse

Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1931), 44–52; in English, see *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 49–58.

³⁵ On Romans 1 and 2, see especially Richard Bell, *No one seeks for God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 1.18–3.20*, WUNT 106 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998). On Acts 17, see Bertil Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, ASNU 21 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1955).

³⁶ Gärtner argues for a wider understanding that also includes the works of God in history; *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 138.

20, Paul develops a not-so-invisible anti-pagan polemic. Since God is invisible, pagan worship of statues or any visible material object is therefore idolatrous. Yet, even though he is as such outside of human perception, he graciously enables man to perceive his eternal power (ἀίδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις), and his deity (θεϊότης). Man can thus perceive in the works of God that there is God, a God who is eternal and categorically different from the works man encounters.

But this revelation is rejected by man. God's revelation is universal and man's rejection of it is universal. Men suppress the truth in unrighteousness (1:19), they do not honor God nor give him thanks (1:21), they did not retain the knowledge of God. Rather, they exchanged the truth of God for idols of their own making. Idolatry is therefore not fate but guilt.

Paul indeed is here talking about a revelation that exceeds the boundaries of God's history with Israel. And he is also talking about a revelation that is at least not explicitly Christological because this general revelation does not reveal the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ).³⁷ But Paul is not following here the natural theology of Hellenistic philosophy. He maintains rather that all knowledge of God is derived from revelation. Another difference is that this knowledge is not simply there in natural man, so that it can be used as a welcome point of contact for the proclamation of the gospel. The pagans have twisted and distorted this knowledge so that natural revelation of God is turned into the worship of idols.

Romans 2: The Natural Knowledge of the Law

Here Paul argues against the attitude of the Jews, which thinks that they are superior to the Gentiles because Israel is given the law. Paul says that there is no advantage given to Israel, since there are Gentiles (ἔθνη) who are a law unto themselves in whose heart the works of the law are written. The evidence for this is the fact that in their conscience are either accusing or excusing thoughts.

The first question that arises is, who are the ἔθνη? There are three different options: 1) Gentiles who fulfill the law and are saved apart from explicit faith in Christ; 2) Gentiles who do some part of the law but who are not saved; 3) Gentile Christians who fulfill the law by virtue of their

³⁷ Bell, on the other hand, thinks that Christ is included in this natural theology because for Paul there can be no revelation without Christ; *No one seeks for God*, 91.

relationship to Christ.³⁸ It seems to me that Douglas Moo in his commentary on Romans is right in choosing option two.³⁹ Paul talks again about a universal phenomenon that is the basis for a moral consciousness. Obviously this can not mean that all Gentiles have a perfect knowledge of the law and do the works of the law. That would hardly be in harmony with what Paul had said just before about the Gentile world that is sunk into idolatry and, consequently, moral depravity and his conclusion afterwards in Romans 3:10–18. What Paul is talking about is a certain knowledge of the will of God, analogous to the knowledge that Israel has from the Torah, and a behavior that mirrors this knowledge. How far this knowledge extends, Paul does not discuss here. Exegetes have proposed an identity of these works that are written in the heart of the Gentiles with the Ten Commandments. The problem here is whether or not Paul really meant that the Gentiles not only know but also do what is required by the First Commandment. So one may have to follow Käsemann in his commentary and leave it rather undermined, stressing that the point Paul is here making is that the Gentiles are also confronted with the will of God and know about their guilt.⁴⁰

Acts 17: The Unknown God

Acts 17 has the closest connection to philosophical natural theology, not only, but also most obviously, through the quote from Aratus in verse 28. Nevertheless, Paul does not simply give a slightly Christianized Stoic diatribe; he is not making an appeal to reason in an effort to prove the existence of God. On the contrary, it is proclamation, as καταγγέλλω and ἀπαγγέλλω at the beginning and ending of the speech denote. Idolatry, not atheism, is the problem of the Athenians for, as the account of Paul's stay in Athens begins, "his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was full of idols" (17:16).

³⁸ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 148–153.

³⁹ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 149.

⁴⁰ "Here, however, it is matter of Gentiles experiencing God's will, not from the Torah as such, but in outline, as it were, from what is written in their hearts. If the text is not left imprecise [German: *schwebend*, RZ] but worked out metaphysically, fear of Pelagianism might lead us to make Augustine's mistake of referring ε[σ]την to Gentile Christians." Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 65; this is an English translation of *An die Römer*, 4. durchgesehene Auflage (Tübingen: Mohr, 1980), 60.

At the beginning of his speech, Paul compliments the Athenians for their religiosity (a *captatio benevolentiae*) using the altar of the unknown God as his starting point. This compliment, however, is not without a sting: The Athenians, a people who sacrifice in the temples and philosophers who engage in metaphysical speculation, revere what they do not know! That is, no real knowledge of God is to be found in Athens. Therefore, Paul continues with a critique of the actual religion he encounters. Verses 24–25 employ the God-as-creator topos to critique pagan concepts of God: God is neither dwelling in a temple nor is he worshipped with hands.⁴¹ He does not receive but gives (δίδους), for he needs nothing. Moreover, what he has made is made not arbitrarily but for a purpose. Paul thus argues in verse 26 that God made (ἐποίησεν) from one nation (ἐνὸς) all the nations of men for two distinct purposes. The two infinitives that depend on ἐποίησεν—κατοικεῖν (to dwell) and ζητεῖν (to search)—denote the purpose of God’s creation of man: to dwell on earth in the land that God has given him and to seek him. This seeking God is here not philosophical speculation: the personal construction speaks against such an understanding. Rather, if we understand this language as an inheritance from the Septuagint, where ζητεῖν θεόν and ζητεῖν κύριον mean “to turn to God, cleave to Him, inquire about Him,”⁴² we come to the understanding that Paul is emphasizing here that man is created towards God.⁴³ “Thus, when the speech alleges that man was created in order to seek God, it is not advancing the philosophical argument based on man’s share in the Divine *Logos*, but is following the Old Testament-Jewish tradition as to the seeking of God Man must be heedful of the revelation, and from the knowledge of God gained thereby will then spring a rightful worship of God.”⁴⁴

Verse 27 continues: “that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him and find him” (Authorized Version). This subordinate clause is an indirect question that uses the optative. It expresses a potentiality. This is not a simple indicative, stating a fact. “The result of seeking will

⁴¹ Incidentally, this line of argumentation is also found in the Old Testament.; cf. Is 66:1.

⁴² Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 156

⁴³ Gärtner refers to 1 Cor 8:6 as a parallel to this passage: “The Creation of men towards God is a principle that cannot be expounded better than by saying that they shall seek God, live for His glory, obey and serve and worship him;” *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 155.

⁴⁴ Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 158.

therefore be uncertain—indeed, any positive outcome is very much doubted. This optative construction expresses a doubt on the speaker's part as to whether men can, on their own, attain to God."⁴⁵ The word *ψηλαφήσειαν*, translated as "haply feel," means to touch concretely as it is used elsewhere in the New Testament. This meaning, however, can be excluded here. The Septuagint uses it in the sense of to grope or to fumble, as a description of the way a blind person seeks to find his way. Against an understanding that sees Paul here stating the universal ability of man to know God, he pictures man as groping for God in the dark. This interpretation goes against the Stoic view of natural theology, since the kinship between God and man guarantees that man will find God. This imagery should make us cautious to be too optimistic about the actual attaining of the knowledge of God through natural revelation, even as the summary of man's situation as "the times of ignorance" attests (v. 30). If Paul's speech at the Areopagus is used to support the thesis that the Gentiles already know the true God, though incompletely or however it is hedged, then this "times of ignorance" is de facto turned into "times of knowledge." This does not qualify as sound exegesis in my opinion.

What about the unknown God though? Does this not prove that the pagans have a valid knowledge of God? Such an assumption would contradict Romans 1, which states that the Greeks did not retain the knowledge of God but fell into idolatry. Paul can make this statement because of the paradoxical inscription: The unknown God. The true God cannot be identified with any of the gods of the Greek pantheon—that is explicitly denied in Acts 17:29. The true God is unknown to his audience. Paul can use the term *God*, but he has to redefine it. It then is neither identical with the sense as used by the popular culture, which is polytheistic, nor is it identical with the Stoic concept of a pantheistic deity nor with the remote gods of the Epicureans nor with the unmoved mover of Aristotle.

The Lutheran Confessions

The Confessions teach a natural revelation of God. The content of this revelation is twofold: the knowledge that there is a God and also a certain

⁴⁵ Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 159. See also Rudolf Pesch, "Die dem Menschen aufgegebenen Suche Gottes führt nicht—wie die Stringenz philosophischer Erkenntnis meinen könnte—ohne weiteres zum Ziel," in *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Vol. 2 (Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), 138.

knowledge of his will. The passages about the natural knowledge are few in the Book of Concord and are mostly in connection with the natural knowledge of the law. The divine law is written in the mind of all men, and therefore, man understands in some way the law (Ap IV,7). The Ten Commandments are written in man's heart (LC II,67). "Natural law includes actual though obscure knowledge of the fact that God is, but only Christ provides us with true knowledge of Him."⁴⁶ Romans 1 is quoted in the Solid Declaration, article II regarding free will: "For, first, although man's reason or natural intellect indeed has still a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, as also of the doctrine of the Law, Rom 1 . . ." it cannot understand the gospel (SD II,9).

Luther refers to non-Christian religions in his Large Catechism in the exposition of the First Commandment and in the explanation of the Creed. He first states the universality of the phenomenon of having a god, that is trusting in something. "For no people have ever been so reprobate as not to institute and observe some divine worship; every one has set up as his special god whatever he looked to for blessings, help, and comfort" (LC I,17). But this worship, exemplified by the religion of ancient Greece and Rome, is idolatrous:

Therefore, the heathen really make their self-invented notions and dreams of God an idol, and put their trust in that which is altogether nothing. Thus it is with all idolatry; for it consists not merely in erecting an image and worshiping it, but rather in the heart, which stands gaping at something else, and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils, and neither cares for God, nor looks to Him for so much good as to believe that He is willing to help, neither believes that whatever good it experiences comes from God. (LC I,21)

The other passage in the Large Catechesim (LC II,66) focuses on the difference between Christians and other religions:

These three articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites—even though they believe in and worship only the one, true, God—nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing, and therefore they

⁴⁶ Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions 1529–1537* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 66.

remain in eternal wrath and condemnation. For they do not have the Lord Christ, and besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷

Lately, this passage has come under discussion. One interpretation suggested that Luther actually teaches here that all traditions of faith believe and worship the same god, who is the one, true God—thus bringing together Luther and Alexander Pope.⁴⁸ Two arguments, however, speak against such an understanding: 1) an argument of contradiction, and 2) an argument of translation. First, if Luther said here that all religions worship the true God, he would be in flagrant contradiction with his statement made earlier (cf., LC I,21). Second, the English translation is not entirely correct. There are two points where the English translation departs from the German: 1) it adds the definite article before “one, true God,” and 2) it translates the construction “*glauben einen wahrhaftigen Gott*” with “believe in the one true God.” But there is a difference in the German at Luther’s time between “*glauben an*” (believe in) and “*glauben* plus accusative object” (believe that).⁴⁹ The Latin translation captured that difference.⁵⁰ A more adequate translation would therefore be:

All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites—even though they believe that there is only one, true, God and worship him—nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them.

Neither Luther nor the Confessions identify the gods of non-Christian religions with the true God. The natural knowledge of God is a “dim spark,” which essentially acknowledges that there is a God, and as such, it explains the universality of religion. Since natural law is part of natural revelation, fallen man has also an innate knowledge of the divine law, and thus, that God further requires morally good behavior. But the religious practice of fallen man is idolatrous.

The Confessions emphasize the *defectiveness* of the natural knowledge of God; it provides a false picture of God and therefore promotes work-

⁴⁷ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 440.

⁴⁸ See Pope, “The Universal Prayer,” fn 1.

⁴⁹ See Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, IV, I, 4 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1949), col. 7836–7837, s.v. “glauben,” III, B 1.

⁵⁰ See John G. Nordling, “Large Catechism III, 66, Latin Version,” *Concordia Journal* 29 (2003): 235–239

righteousness. They do not so much stress the lack of natural knowledge about God as they do its falseness. The natural knowledge of God sets forth a distorted picture of Him. It is incapable of showing us the God who justifies and saves from sin.⁵¹

The confessions have no interest beyond that. That can be explained with the fact that natural theology was not at the heart of the Reformation controversy, or the lack of the atheistic challenge in the sixteenth century.⁵² One reason might be that the Reformers had a certain distance to traditional approaches to natural theology, as we have encountered them in Thomas Aquinas, because they saw it as too philosophical and speculative—an approach that tries to deal with the absolute God instead of the God incarnate.⁵³

IV. Luther's View

From Romans 1 and 2, Luther followed that there is a natural revelation of God through nature and through the innate knowledge of the law. This

⁵¹ Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions 1529–1537*, 67, emphasis original.

⁵² For the debate on atheism in the seventeenth century, see Hans-Martin Barth, *Atheismus und Orthodoxie. Analysen und Modelle christlicher Apologetik im 17. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971).

⁵³ Thus Luther writes: "The people of Israel did not have a God who was viewed 'absolutely,' to use the expression, the way the inexperienced monks rise into heaven with their speculations and think about God as He is in Himself. From this absolute God everyone should flee who does not want to perish, because human nature and the absolute God—for the sake of teaching we use this familiar term—are the bitterest of enemies. Human weakness cannot help being crushed by such majesty, as Scripture reminds us over and over. Let no one, therefore, interpret David as speaking with the absolute God. He is speaking with God as He is dressed and clothed in His Word and promises, so that from the name 'God' we cannot exclude Christ, whom God promised to Adam and the other patriarchs. We must take hold of this God, not naked but clothed and revealed in His Word; otherwise certain despair will crush us. This distinction must always be made between the Prophets who speak with God, and the Gentiles. The Gentiles speak with God outside His Word and promises, according to the thoughts of their own hearts; but the Prophets speak with God as He is clothed and revealed in His promises and Word. This God, clothed in such a kind appearance and, so to speak, in such a pleasant mask, that is to say, dressed in His promises—this God we can grasp and look at with joy and trust. The absolute God, on the other hand, is like an iron wall, against which we cannot bump without destroying ourselves" (AE 12, 312). Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 12: *Selected Psalms I*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 312.

understanding shall be expounded on the basis of his exposition of Jonah 1:5: "Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god."⁵⁴

Luther sees in the very fact that the mariners cry to their gods as a proof for general revelation as Paul describes it in Romans 1: "For if they had been ignorant of the existence of God or of a godhead, how could they have called upon him and cried to him?"⁵⁵ Although there are atheists (Luther brings examples from classical antiquity such as the Epicureans and Pliny), this is a secondary step, a reaction against the natural knowledge of God. The content of this natural revelation that can be known through nature and reason is the existence of the Godhead as a being superior to all other things. As such a God, he is the source of all good things and able to deliver. "That is as far as the natural light of reason sheds its rays—it regards God as kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent. And that is indeed a bright light."⁵⁶ However, there are grave deficiencies. First, although reason knows that God can help, it does not know if God is willing to help man. Second, though reason can say that there is a god, it is unable to identify who this God is. But man does not stay in this aporia, rather he calls god what is not God and does not recognize the true God.

Thus reason also plays blindman's buff with God; it consistently gropes in the dark and misses the mark. It calls that God which is not God and fails to call Him God who really is God. Reason would do neither the one nor the other if it were not conscious of the existence of God or if it really knew who and what God is. Therefore it rushes in clumsily and assigns the name God and ascribes divine honor to its own idea of God. Thus reason never finds the true God, but it finds the devil or its own concept of God, ruled by the devil.⁵⁷

This is not only true of the pagan sailors of the time of Jonah. In the Roman Catholic Church, Luther finds also the same thing happening, that is, man fashions an idol in his likeness and puts it in God's stead. Here the idol is a god that is "moved and satisfied" by good works. The result is idolatry.

⁵⁴ The 1526 German exposition of Jonah is quoted according to the translation in Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 19: *Lectures on the Minor Prophets II—Jonah and Habakkuk*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 53–57.

⁵⁵ Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, 53.

⁵⁶ Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, 54.

⁵⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, 55.

They miss the true God, and nothing remains but their own false notion. That is their god. To him they assign the name and honor of God. Of course, no one but the devil can be behind this delusion, for he inspires and governs these thoughts. Thus their delusion is their idol; it is the image of the devil they hold in their hearts.⁵⁸

Luther holds together the universal revelation that is the basis of all revelations with a strong rejection of every non-Christian belief as idolatry:

Thus you also note that the people in the ship all know of God, but they have no definite God. For Jonah relates that each one calls on his own god, that is, his concept of God, whatever he conceives of God in his mind. And in that way they all fail to encounter the one true God and have nothing but idols whom they call God and honor as God. Therefore their faith, too, was false; it was superstition and idolatry and of no avail.⁵⁹

This attitude towards other religions and their gods did not change. Luther was unequivocal that these gods were not identical with the true God, but figments of man's imagination. About a fortnight before his death, Luther preached in Eisleben on this very topic. He clearly articulated his belief in this matter which he had held throughout his life:

Therefore, even though Turks, Jews, and all heathen know to say that much of God as reason can know from his works, i.e. that he is a creator of all things, and that one should be obedient to him etc. And they always cry and slander that we worship many gods, but they do that to us unjustly and wrong. We know, however, that they don't yet have the true God, because they do not want to hear his word, which he has revealed about himself from the beginning of the world to the holy fathers and prophets, and at last through Christ himself and his apostles, neither do they know him in this way. But they slander and rave against that, picture him as a God who has no Son neither Holy Ghost in his deity, and therefore take nothing but a mere dream to be God and worship [him]; indeed, they boast of lies and blasphemies as knowledge of God, because they dare to know God without divine revelation, that is: without the Holy Ghost, and to come to God without a mediator (which must be God's only Son). And therefore strictly speaking they are without God, because there is truly no other God

⁵⁸ Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, 55.

⁵⁹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, 56-57.

than this one, who is the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who both reveal themselves through the Holy Ghost to his church and act and rule in the hearts of the believers. As 2 John [9] says: "Who does not believe and stay in Christ's doctrine, has no God." And Christ John 5[:23]: "Who does not honor the Son, does not honor the Father either." Also John 14[:6] Nobody comes to the Father but through me."⁶⁰

Unlike classical natural theology, Luther did not believe that calm reasoning from nature would lead fallen man to an essentially true albeit imperfect picture of God. It can also drive into atheism, for example the problem of evil:

Tell me, is it not in everyone's judgment most unjust that the wicked should prosper and the good suffer? But that is the way of the world. Here even the greatest minds have stumbled and fallen, denying the existence of God and imagining that all things are moved at random by blind Chance or Fortune. So, for example, did the Epicureans and Pliny; while Aristotle, in order to preserve that Supreme Being of his from unhappiness, never lets him look at anything but himself, because he thinks it would be most unpleasant for him to see so much suffering and so may injustices.⁶¹

The solution of this argument — the existence of God or the existence of a God who governs his creation — is again for Luther not a rational argument along the lines of classical natural theology but the proclamation of Scripture:

Yet all this, which looks so very like injustice in God, and which has been represented as such with arguments that no human reason or light of nature can resist, is very easily dealt with in the light of the gospel and the knowledge of grace, by which we are taught that although the ungodly flourish in their bodies, they lose their souls.⁶²

This again shows that the use of natural theology is more limited in Luther than in large parts of the theological tradition.

⁶⁰ Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 51, (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), 151,16–36; my translation from *Sermon at the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany*, *Eisleben*, 31 January 1546.

⁶¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 33: *Career of the Reformer III*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 291.

⁶² Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 33, 291.

Ultimately the difference between Luther and Aquinas is not so much in certain details of what is comprised in the natural knowledge of God. It seems rather that the main difference is in Luther's leading question: In what do you trust? So the question to everybody is: Whom do you worship, in whom do you believe? Thus non-Christian religions (and even some forms of Christendom) must be regarded as idolatry, and not an entry-level form of Christianity. To put it differently: reason can make a negative contribution—it can say that atheism is not a reasonable explanation of the world; however, it cannot say what kind of theism or what religion is true.

V. Conclusion

Although Barth's position has an impressive consistency, his rejection of any revelation of God in nature because of his overarching principle that all revelation must be christological is not tenable. It simply does not agree with Romans 1. God does reveal himself to all people through his works. So the term *natural revelation* should not be banished from Christian theology.

On the other hand, the theological edifices that were erected on Romans 1 and 2 and Acts 17 and other passages to develop a metaphysical concept of God that was then the first step in knowing the true God, miss the intention of these passages and their evaluation of the situation of man after the fall. Man's universal religiosity is a reflection of or rather on natural revelation. So the old argument for the existence of God *e consensu gentium* actually has merit. There is a supernatural reason for man's religion. Yet man's religion reflects natural revelation in such a distorted way that it is not possible by simple observation of the religious phenomena to distill out of these diverse and contradicting images of god(s) the image of the true God. Coming from revelation, we recognize that certain pronouncements about what God is are true if you extricate them from the sea of errors. Man has not effectively known God through this revelation, not because of the deficiencies of the revelation, but because of his sinful, warped nature. In the hands of man, the natural revelation of the true God is turned into an idolatrous concept of god and gods. The problem of man is therefore not simply an intellectual one, but it is sin. The remedy for this is not a return to a purer, better natural theology but the proclamation of Christ.

The concepts of god in the religions and philosophies of this world are therefore not only deficient but positively wrong. They do not have at their

core a purely maintained true knowledge of God. Zeus, Brahma or Odin are not identical with the triune God or with the Father of Jesus Christ (not to mention Hera, Kali, or Freya). They are also not a preliminary stage of faith in the true God. Of course one can say that at least the adherents of these religions believe in one or several divine beings and are therefore not atheists. But their concept of deity needs a thorough-going conversion, as they themselves need conversion—the death of the old man and the birth of the new man.⁶³ They will define God differently after they have embraced the triune God, confessing their former position as the worship of idols. That is also true for faiths that are post-biblical like modern Judaism or Islam. It would be a caricature of the biblical doctrine of natural revelation and truly anti-trinitarian to identify any god of a non-Christian religion with the Father simply because this god is called and recognized as the creator of the world.

Classical natural theology suffers from the fate that it constructs a metaphysical concept of God that is essentially non-trinitarian. Then the problem arises that either the Trinity is an afterthought and has to be fit into a finished concept of God, or the Trinity becomes superfluous, as for the Deists in the eighteenth century. This approach suffers such problems because it tries to form a closed concept where there should be an openness. The traditional definition of God, according to natural knowledge, does not include any reference that it is deficient. So, instead of building systems, it would be more appropriate to speak in aphorisms and fragments about the natural revelation of God.

The effect of natural revelation for fallen man lies in the fact that he makes idols and that he has a sense of guilt or responsibility to a norm higher than himself. He finds himself entangled in a web of conflicting values, which results in a guilt he cannot cut through. If one seeks a point of contact, this is it, even though here, too, it is not a simple relation of human question and divine answer. That is not much, but more than nothing. Apologetically, that means that it can be shown that man is a creature of faith in the sense of Luther's explanation of the First Commandment. Even atheism is just another form of natural man forming

⁶³ Compare Elert's critique from a slightly different angle: "It [sc. later Lutheran dogmatics] lost sight of the inner connection between the natural knowledge of God and the necessity for penitence. It forgot that 'natural' man's knowledge of God leads to doubt about God, thus to unbelief, and therefore makes penitence necessary, and that in all circumstances faith presupposes a break with the natural knowledge." Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 50-51.

idols, another example of man who believes—but not in the true God. Nevertheless, it can be shown that the question of guilt is something man has to deal with.

The field of natural theology as it has existed in philosophy and influenced the treatment of natural revelation in theology is not useless to theology. It is not simply identical with the natural knowledge of God. Theology can use it to show that theism is at the very least not a superstitious relic of an unscientific age. Theology can use it to preach the law, that is to convict people. This use notwithstanding, the faith into which one can be reasoned is nonetheless not faith in the triune God.

Such a skeptical evaluation of much of what was and is passed as natural revelation should not be misunderstood as an exclusion of the presence of God in nature and history. The way to recognize him there goes through his revelation in the word—the eternal Word that was made flesh and the written and oral word that was given by the Spirit. Through this revelation, the world becomes once again transparent reflecting God's goodness because God as the one who sustains and governs his creation every moment and who loves and sent us his Son are not always congruent to our perception. The question of evil and suffering is not intellectually solved in this life.

The way out of idolatry to the knowledge of the true God is to know God as the Father of the Son through the Spirit. The way to this knowledge is through the babe in the manger, through a man hanging on the cross, through the proclamation of Christ crucified. That might appear cruder than an approach through "pure thinking," but it follows the wisdom of God instead of the wisdom of man. "For, since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21).