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Natural Theology: Are the Philosophical Arguments Valid?

The question posed in the title of this paper cannot, in my view, be answered with a direct 'yes' or 'no', because it can be posited in at least two quite different ways. (1) 'Were the philosophical arguments which the Scholastic theologians used, valid?' (2) 'Are the philosophical arguments which have been employed in the defence of any system of Natural Theology valid?' If we take the philosophical arguments which were used by the Scholastics, then, as will be seen later, we must conclude that they were not always valid. But, if we take the arguments used by later theologians including Reformed, there is good reason for concluding that they were valid and still have a certain validity. That is the position which Dr. F. H. Cleobury defended at a previous Victoria Institute day-conference as well as in his book — *A Return to Natural Theology* (published by James Clark in 1967) and it is the position which I am going to attempt to defend today.

Broadly speaking, early Protestantism set its face fairly resolutely against the Scholastic system of Natural Theology, both because this system was thought to elevate reason above revelation as well as because of its influence over the entire Scholastic edifice of belief. Luther's rejection of the system was uncompromising, so much so that it has been argued that he left very little room for the use of reason to appeal to any 'common ground' with the unbeliever. It is noticeable that numerous theologians and philosophers in the Lutheran tradition have shown themselves hostile to Natural Theology. In his *Metaphysical Works* Kant was critical of Scholastic methodology, and retained only the Moral Argument for God's existence in his ethical framework. Professor John Ballie, in *Our Knowledge of God* concludes from Barth's writings:-

'It is (with Dr. Barth) a fundamental premiss that no knowledge of God exists in the world, save in the hearts of regenerate Christian believers. He stands as did Ritschl and Herrman in previous generations in the tradition of that Lutheran christocentrism which made Christ the Mediator no less of knowledge than of salvation; the christocentrism which denies that except in His Incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth, God has ever spoken to man at all . . .'¹

1. *Our Knowledge of God* by John Ballie, D. Litt., D.D. S.T.D., Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. Published by the Oxford University Press in 1941 (page 17).

Central to Barth's theology is the Lutheran doctrine of God which sees Him as totally transcendent.

Yet, within the Reformed community other Reformers such as Calvin attached much greater importance to the value of human reason, and consequently came early to the conclusion that there would have to be an accommodation with Natural Theology, explaining why within most Reformed and even Protestant communions 'scholastic' tendencies have appeared.

Taking the question posed in our title in the first sense — that of the validity of the arguments which were used by the Scholastic theologians — it has to be stated that Thomas Aquinas's 'Five Ways' were in no sense a system which he invented in the 13th century. What came to be known as the 'theistic proofs' had been crystalizing in Christian centres of learning over many centuries. Anselm, for example, who is associated by evangelicals with one of the finest expositions of the biblical doctrine of the Atonement, is equally known by theologians generally for his challenging defence of the Ontological Argument and is often referred to as the 'father of Scholasticism'. So that the strident objection to a reasoned defence of the faith which sometimes comes through in that branch of evangelicalism which is closest to Lutheranism, not only does damage to a sound Christian apologetic but is a departure from mainstream Christian thinking.

Kant's weakness on the theistic proofs which led him into Deism is one clear example of where Lutheran thinking was moving. In his *Metaphysical Works* Kant failed to anticipate that his difficulties with four of the theistic proofs could be raised against the Moral Argument as well, because what he was attacking too often was the essential framework of Christian belief.

The Scholastics were merely applying the arguments which they had inherited from earlier theologians to the issues which had come to the forefront in the debates of their day. It would not even be true to say that the challenge of Aristotelianism to the Christian faith was new, because some of Aristotle's writings had been known to Christian scholars right back to the first century AD. What had happened was that with the discovery of a more representative range of Aristotle's works the nature of the Aristotelian challenge to long-held Christian attitudes was being appreciated for the first time. These lengthy quotations from Dr. W. Moeller's *The History of the Church* will serve to fill in the historical background:-

The Philosophy of Aristotle, strongly admixed with Neoplatonic elements from the Greek Church and science, had reached the Arabs and had developed among them a philosophy which at first came into acute discord with the orthodox faith of Islam. The Arabian free-thinkers (Mutazilites), from

as early as the 8th century practised unlimited rationalistic criticism of the positive principle of religion, but were afterwards more repressed by a less radical philosophy. Alfarabia (950) attempted to place Aristotle, understood in a Neoplatonic (emanational) sense, on a harmonious relationship with the religious elements of the Koran. . . . To this were linked the Arabian philosophers of Spain, Avempaze, Abubazer, and especially Averroes, with the last, for whom philosophy appeared as the higher explanation of religion; religion, which is indispensable for the many, gives the highest truths a pictorial husk, philosophy gives them in the pure rational form. . . . It was the Jews also who, by commission of the Emperor Frederick II, under the guidance of Michael Scotus and Hermanus Alemannus translated commentaries of Averroes or Aristotle and Aristotelian writings. Soon thereafter the Greek Aristotle became known to a greater extent through Robert Capito, Thomas Cantipratina and others. Even before the opening up of these purer sources, the Arabian philosophy and a few Pseudo-Aristotelian productions sprang from Neoplatonism, such as the Theologia of Aristotle and the De Causis, which was drawn from Proclus, and began their influence in the West.¹²

To understand why Natural Theology took the form it did under Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), we have to appreciate that it was a time of crisis for the Church in Europe, as it still is for the Church in Africa today. Central beliefs were under attack through the advances which had been made not only by a new civilization but a new intellectualism.

It is only as we hear of the discouragements which are being experienced by Christian missionaries working in Islamic countries that we begin to appreciate the magnitude of the challenge facing the European Church in Aquinas's day. An Islamic crusade had ignited along the Mediterranean coast and was sweeping Northwards. The scenes of religious fervour brought to us by television from Iran illustrate the hold Islam can take on the masses. It has the capacity to fire the imagination. And, alongside the imperialistic advance by a great Monotheistic religion, there came a second, even greater threat. Avery Dulles, in *Theological Resources: A History of Apologetics*, spells it out for us:-

The penetration of Averroes into European universities precipitated a major spiritual crisis. The leading theologians of the 13th century were compelled to spend much of their time and energy in efforts to resist the Averroist tide.¹³

Where Islamic fervour was capturing the popular imagination, Aristotelianism was winning converts among the intellectuals in the universities. The Church's European thinkers, more at home with Plato

2. *History of the Christian Church* by Dr. W. Moeller, Professor of Church History at the University of Kiel. Published by Swan and Sonnenschein and Co., in 1893 (page 422).

3. *Theological Resources: a History of Apologetics* by Avery Dulles. Published by Hutchison and Corpus in 1971.

and the Fathers, found it difficult to come to grips with this new empirical, all-embracing system. Much stood to be lost if convincing counter-arguments were not forthcoming.

Is there anything really so very new in this? In every period of the Church's history Christian scholars have been called upon to 'give a reason for their hope'. The source of attack has shifted radically from one period to another, and consequently the issues under dispute have changed. The debate of one age is not the debate of another. But the task of the Christian scholar has always remained the same — to maintain the credibility of the Christian faith from every attack, whatever its source. In the heat of the battle Christian scholars have made mistakes. They have made errors of judgment which have been quite serious. But is that any reason for condemning their efforts; is it not better to fight badly than not to fight at all?

Thomas Aquinas devoted himself to the Herculean task of coming to terms with the Aristotelian challenge. So much so that it is impossible for us to think of this system without being reminded of Aquinas's work. The challenge stretched him to the limit and beyond, for, simply 'breaking the system' affected his religious outlook so much that there were times when he felt completely disoriented. Then he had to bring forward arguments to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith. This is where he was exposed to the danger of casting his defence in an Aristotelian mould. That is why at times he succeeded in making himself appear a disciple of Aristotle! His intention was otherwise. That can be seen from the effects of his influence, for, as a matter of history, Aquinas's victories on the intellectual battle-field signalled the turning-point for the Church in Europe in its stand against Islam. The day may yet come when, in surveying the whole course of Church history, Christians will be drawn to conclude that Aquinas took part in one of the most important rear-guard actions in defence of historic Christianity. Etienne Gilson, Director of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto, Canada, defends Aquinas's defence of the Christian faith in this way:-

'If we grant that a philosophy is not to be defined from the elements it borrows but from the spirit which quickens it, we shall see here neither Platonism nor Aristotelianism but, above all, Christianity.'⁴

In many respects the crisis in the Church which was precipitated by the Scholastic movement is now behind us. In Aquinas's day Aristotelianism posed what was considered to be the most serious threat to the Christian message. Few would argue that that is still true today. The scientific

4. *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* by Etienne Gilson, Director of Studies, the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto. Published by Victor Gollancz Ltd. in 1957 (page 378).

community certainly no longer feels any obligation to follow Aristotle's really rather 'unempirical' hunches. As soon as the sciences were able to find their feet through the gathering of data which could be verified, they developed a momentum of their own and distanced themselves from philosophy. That is not to say that they succeeded in freeing themselves from philosophical systems, for the way science is used is an expression of a system of ideas, but free to the extent that scientists no longer felt an obligation to refer automatically to one philosophical system, and least of all the Aristotelian system.

Even within the Roman Catholic Church where Aquinas's influence has been so strong and so much revered, it would appear that scholars are resigned to the abandonment of the Aristotelian system. Because the system itself is fascinating it is likely that it will continue to be studied by scholars with a passion for the unusual. But the system itself is no longer at the forefront of the debate in Christian apologetics. Quite a number of Aristotle's insights and distinctions have established themselves as both valid and profound, but several of the presuppositions on which the system was built have not survived scientific investigation.

In the light of this we have to conclude that Scholastics were guilty of a serious error of judgement in attaching so much importance to Aristotle's system. For later generations of Christians the lesson here is to avoid exploiting philosophical fashion to make the Gospel acceptable to secular thought. The debate in every generation must always be within the context of the existing framework of ideas. What the Christian says must make sense to the people he is addressing. It must be relevant. But because there is much about the Gospel which will always be unacceptable to the 'natural man' and in that it is seen to be the correct 'remedy for sin' — the attempt to explain the Gospel in terms that will satisfy the spirit of the age will always fail. To re-interpret the Gospel to fit in with the ethos of philosophical theory in vogue at a given time can only serve to rob it of its power and glory.

The application of Gospel truths to what is going on in the philosophical workshop is a different matter. The Gospel has much to say to the philosopher as he goes about his vital work. He will find it impossible to avoid contact with its eternal truths, make of them what he will. A sensitive philosopher will learn much from the Gospel! And for the theologian, the moral is clear. He can make no greater mistake than to forsake the light of the Gospel for the light created by the latest philosophical luminary. If a general objection to the approach taken by the Scholastics can be established, it is that they were too much enamoured with one philosophical system.

Whether we are right in going beyond that objection to associate the Scholastics with the Arabian philosophers of Spain such as Avempaze,

Abubazer and especially Averroes, to whom '... philosophy appeared as the higher explanation of religion . . .', because, '... religion, which is indispensable to the many, gives the highest truths a pictorial husk, philosophy gives them in the pure rational form,'² is much more doubtful. There was indeed the danger that the Scholastics would follow the Arab philosophers down that path and in one or two instances they probably did, but were they aware of the danger and did they take measures to counteract it? Here is how Etienne Gilson meets this objection:-

(Aquinas's) aim was to, '... integrate a science of reason with a science of revelation without at the same time corrupting both the purity of reason and the purity of revelation.'⁵

Whether we can speak too glibly about the 'purity of reason' in the light of the Fall is a question which many evangelicals would want to debate. Kant also strove to protect the purity of reason. Still we must ask — 'is the concept valid or helpful?' It is true that:-

'... God has not revealed about creatures many things which they are capable of learning by themselves, and the knowledge of which is not necessary for salvation.'⁶

And, Christians of all persuasions must explain how the 'natural man' has acquired the knowledge which he possesses and demonstrates so impressively. There then we have the crux of the problem in the debate between the Scholastics and the Lutherans. To what extent can we appeal to the purity of reason and the purity of revelation and place them side-by-side in that way? Must the one exclude the other? It would seem that the Lutherans have been insisting that the 'light of reason' must eventually displace the 'light of revelation', whereas the Scholastics have been insisting that that need not be the case.

To sum up our difficulties with how the Scholastics handled the questions involved, the concentration during the 13th century on Aristotelian ideas was so intense that all the main questions on theology and philosophy tended to be referred to the touchstone of Aristotelianism, not uncritically of course, but regularly and systematically all the same. The fate of Christian apologetics was becoming too much bound up with the fortunes of the Aristotelian system. It would share in its triumphs, but equally, suffer on account of its defeats, and this was dangerous. The initiative was slipping away from the Christian scholar to the pagan philosopher. And, in addition to conceding too much to the Aristotelian system, or over-estimating the soundness of its every argument, Christian thought was being cast in an Aristotelian mould.

5. Etienne Gilson *op. cit.*, (page 10).

6. Etienne Gilson *op. cit.*, (page 21).

Out of respect for Thomas Aquinas, the Doctor of the Church, (a title which some Roman scholars appear to be willing now to confer on John Calvin) the Roman Church at the Council of Trent committed itself quite considerably to the Aristotelian view of the physical order. After a while it had the problem of defending that view in the face of contrary evidence which was being uncovered through empirical research. Much of Aristotelianism was now seen not to be based on empirical research at all. The authority of the Church was being undermined. At the same time, we should be careful not to over-state the damage inflicted on the Roman Church by this discovery, because the Aristotelian philosophical system had helped to pioneer empirical research into the workings of the physical order, even if Aristotle was wrong about the principles which underlie its workings. Much of Aristotelian philosophy was thoroughly sound, as Protestant and Reformed scholars were to discover when they too saw that they had to give a prominent place to the study of Aristotle.

Turning then to the second way of reading the question in our title, that of deciding whether or not the philosophical arguments which have been used in other systems of Natural Theology are valid; I am now going to attempt to show why they are.

The first major argument in support of that view is that, until the Reformation, the study of Natural Theology was an essential part of a complete theological training. The 'theistic proofs' were not thought up by the Scholastics but were part of Christian apologetics from an early period in the Church's history. Luther's attack on Natural Theology would have made little sense to Augustine or any of the other great Christian thinkers.

The second major argument is that evangelical and Reformed theological text-books on theology, although sometimes critical of Natural Theology, very often have an introductory section which is Natural Theology under a different name. The better text-books do not even attempt to conceal the fact that they cannot maintain their position consistently. In E. J. Cannell's scholarly — *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (published by Eerdmans in 1964) — the carefully constructed attack on Natural Theology is drastically undermined by the admission on page 251 'Therefore, properly conceived, natural theology is possible, for the heavens genuinely show the handiwork of God by crying out continually that God is responsible for their beauty, grandeur, and order.'

The third major argument is that Theology proper is indebted to Natural Theology for some of its concepts. We cannot begin to understand the theological debate which burst into life at the Reformation,

and what really bothered Luther, unless we have a clear understanding of the history of dogma.

As every student of theology must, sooner or later, come to a conclusion about the place of the light of nature in Christian belief, we are now going to pursue discussion of this question further under two headings:-

1. Knowledge by Investigation; and, 2. Knowledge by Intuition.

1. *Knowledge by Investigation* (Objective reasoning)

A key question in this discussion is: 'How much can we find out about God through our own investigation?' Supposing that we had never heard the Gospel or read the Bible. How much could our own observations and investigations tell us about God? Two biblical passages have a direct bearing on this question.

How clearly the sky reveals God's glory!
 How plainly it shows what he has done!
 Each day announces it to the following day;
 each night repeats it to the next.
 No speech or words are used,
 no sound is heard;
 Yet their voice goes out to all the world
 and is heard to the ends of the earth.

(Ps. 19:1-4 NEB)

Does the Psalmist mean that we can find out something valid about God through our own investigation? It would be hard to conclude otherwise. Is this conviction repeated in the New Testament? If anything, Paul goes beyond what is stated in Ps.19, because not only does he argue that 'Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things that God has made . . .' but, he goes on, 'So these people have no excuse at all . . .' (Romans 1:20 GNB) The story in man's quest for God does not of course end there, but for our present purposes it is the 'story so far' that is important.

What we call scientific investigation is very much a part of modern life. The Victoria Institute itself bears testimony to the evangelical conviction that science, when rightly used, can confer many blessings on mankind. And yet scientific investigation very often leads directly to conflict with the Christian faith. Because of the influence of science many in our world are coming to the view that all the workings of the universe can be explained on the basis of a closed system of cause and effect. There is then very little room left for God as our Creator and Sustainer.

Certainly, scientific investigation will not lead us inevitably to the God

of the Scriptures. In Communist countries armies of scientists go about their work fully convinced that the atheistic ethos which is propagated by the State can hold up under every form of scrutiny. For that matter, armies of scientists in the West go about their work without reference to the Creator's glory in Nature. And yet, we know that it would be far from the truth to suggest that all scientists react in that way. If anything, the picture conveyed from Communist countries belies the reality, because, not only are some of the best scientists in Communist countries believers, but many of them are willing to endure persecution for the sake of their beliefs. What the remainder really think is impossible to know under a system which has such little respect for the freedom of the individual.

What is important is that numerous Christians can trace their conversion to conclusions which had been arrived at, initially, through an observation of the natural order. These observations can range from the profound to the bizarre, but what matters is that they all count! Even the mistakes can lead to deeper insights, as can be seen from the accounts of several conversions recorded in the New Testament.

Calvin insisted that the reason why we can find belief in a god or gods among communities which have never heard the Gospel, can be found on the basis of what man can discover on his own. And that is not all; over a period of time, Animism can be seen to give way to Polytheism and Polytheism to Monotheism. Monotheism, in spite of the interest shown by Westerners in Pantheism, has proved to be the most durable and satisfying of all the religious systems.

The New Testament illustrates how enquirers who through their own striving after God arrived at Monotheism and found in the God of the Scriptures the God for whom they had been searching. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews was probably a '... philonian converted to Christianity.' (Menagoz)

Granted, the light of nature is weak. It is certainly not sufficient for salvation. It can never be used as an argument for neglecting evangelism. And yet, although the light may be weak, it does exist and serves a useful purpose. Even if it can never be regarded as a substitute for evangelism, it is always a factor in pre-evangelism. Seldom do we speak to someone about the Gospel without finding out what the light of nature has taught him or her already. Even primitive tribes know 'something'.

2. Knowledge by Subjective Conviction

The other side of the coin in the way Christians approach Natural Theology, is to observe that we look for the marks of God's handiwork in

the Creation because we are made in His image. To a greater or lesser extent, most can concur with the Psalmist when he confesses:-

'As a deer longs for a stream of cool water,
so I long for you, O God.
I thirst for you, the living God;
when can I go and worship in your presence?'

(Ps. 42:1-2 GNB)

But this spiritual dimension in man which leads him to seek religious experience raises serious problems. Many Christians defend their beliefs by appealing to subjective conviction. Here they are following Luther, who tended to put the light of nature and the light of revelation against each other. Some Christians would go as far as to say — 'nature tells us nothing'. But the atheist can object that subjectivism is unreliable because there is no way of checking what Christians claim to be true, against what we can establish or verify from thorough, scientific investigation. The Logical Positivists gave a clear expression of this difficulty, and found out at the same time that through scientific investigation we can formally prove only so much. But in a world where the scientific method plays such a major part in every facet of life, the Christian cannot ignore what scientific enquiry is saying to us. Out-and-out subjectivism is of limited value. Members of all religious groups use the subjective argument.

So that, however fragmentary, information about the Creator gleaned from an objective study of the natural order is worth its weight in gold, because it takes us to a court of appeal which is independent of our all too fallible private subjectivism. Christian critics of Natural Theology protest that the study of the natural order will never provide us with the evidence we require if we are to prove the existence of the God of the Scriptures. In his *Metaphysical Writings* Kant maintains a sustained attack on the 'theistic proofs', concluding that these so-called proofs are not proofs at all, in the strict sense of the word. Many evangelical scholars have been content to take Kant's word for it.

Van Til urges that we argue in a circle. This can be made to look very neat and tidy philosophically. In any case, everyone argues in a circle, so why not the Christian? When he has finished stating his case the Christian will be seen to have presented the world-view which makes most sense. Carnell rejects 'Christian empiricism' for 'Christian rationalism', which he defines by the formula ' . . . that which is horizontally self-consistent and vertically fits the facts.'

But it should always be regarded an unhappy development when we feel our faith threatened by objective investigation into the workings of the Creation. The greater danger, rather, is to keep investigation of the

natural order and faith separate, until we can see no connection between them and it becomes a question of — faith or science. It is to be feared that a radical dichotomy between faith and science is what circular reasoning has led to, in communities which have placed science out of bounds to religious investigation. That is the danger implicit in all the systems built on circular reasoning. Faith for the Christian must be for real life in the real world.

Admittedly, the Bible stresses the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion, but this is never in isolation from mental assent to the propositions of objective revelation.

Conclusion

It would be a gross over-simplification to suppose that Luther's protest at the Reformation was mainly directed against the Scholastic view of Natural Theology. He was far too much of a theologian and a philosopher for that to be possible. The Reformation was not about one question but about a whole range of questions. Some had to do with theology and others with philosophy, and still others with politics and the power-struggle between the most powerful nations in Europe. It is true that Luther detected and rightly condemned the drift in Scholastic thinking into Aristotelianism. The Church was being taken too much out on a limb. Luther was sounding an alarm.

But in doing so, it is almost certain that he over-reacted. The Reform movement in almost every country had to distance itself from Luther's rather extreme view. Gradually Natural Theology was rehabilitated in Christian centres of learning, returning to the old view that Special Revelation is always of greater value than General Revelation.

On the charge that the Scholastics opened the way for an unbelieving study and use of science, the evidence is less conclusive. If anything, Liberal Protestantism has been the chief culprit in the deification of the scientific method. The god of science has found his way into some of the most secure bastions of Protestant orthodoxy.

Contemporary Moral Philosophy has in any case shown that the scientific method can only be carried so far. It cannot speak to the whole of life. Through science we can 'formally prove' only so much. Scientists themselves have moved away from what were once thought to be the 'iron clad laws of physics'. Reality, even for the scientist, is now known to be much more complex.

And this brings us to a much more serviceable definition of knowledge. We make decisions in life on the basis of a wide range of considerations. Seldom is it possible to make a big decision on the basis of 'one proven fact' alone. It is through our experience of life that we

build up the information necessary to arrive at conclusions with confidence. We want to check up that this 'fact' works in daily life in a way which will not undermine our system of values, and so on. Our concern is not with one narrow part of knowledge but with the whole. On the basis of our complete experience of life we can see evidences of God's glory in every part of the Creation.

When and how the light of nature gives way to the greater light found in Jesus Christ, is not our primary concern today. The Holy Spirit's working is like the blowing of the wind — unseen and mysterious. The religious enquirers who came to Jesus, came with the hope that in the Gospel they would find the message for which they had been waiting. They came from very different backgrounds. That should make us careful about laying down one set path by which the unbelieving come to embrace Christ as Saviour. Christ is the only way to the Father. He is also at the centre of a rich and diverse Creation. The Holy Spirit alone chooses the path by which individuals with contrasting personalities and needs return through the Son to the Father's home.