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Natural Theology and the Different Bodies of the Christian Gospel[*]

Part 1: What is the Problem for which Natural Theology Seems a Solution?

John G. Flett

Pilgrim Theological College, University of Divinity, Australia

Abstract

In post-colonial contexts, the issues of cultural heritage and local embodiments of the faith drive much of the theological reflection and lived practice. One common starting point for this reflection lies in arguments for natural theology. That is, a legitimising rationale for contextual norms resides in a notion of creation as including a universal experience of the divine. Reference to natural theology is understood as providing a "point of contact" between a general knowledge of the divine and the particular revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In rejection of this position, the following argues that natural theology draws on similar forms of universalism that underlay the colonial endeavour and works against the development of local theologies. It illustrates this point by reference to German missions and how they, via a form of natural theology, considered local forms as necessary to the embodiment of the gospel itself. In affirming this, however, this mission theory came to affirm National Socialism as itself a form of cultural evangelisation. Precisely in reference to this need to develop local Christian theologies, natural theology fails to provide an adequate starting point.

Key Words

Natural theology, colonisation, contextualisation, creation, cultural heritage, point of contact, universality, Volk, cultural imperialism

Even though this essay addresses natural theology, it is not interested in the traditional ontological, cosmological, or teleological arguments for the existence of God.[1] It is, instead, interested in how natural theology has

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[*] These two essays began as three lectures delivered to the Melanesian Association of Theological School annual conference on the topic of "natural theology." I am most grateful to MATS and its leaders for the invitation; to the hosts, Christian Leaders Training College, Maxon Mani, and William Longgar, for their encouragement; and to those who kept us all far too well fed for their generosity and hospitality. **Editor**: the second essay will appear in the next issue of *MJT*.

[1] For a good overview of these arguments, and the contemporary shifts in approach to natural

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Email: john.flett@gmail.com | **ORCID:** 0000-0003-4228-6644

appeared within mission circles, and especially in the attempts to establish a bridge between traditional religious and cultural heritage and the Christian faith. One common argument in this regard holds that God reveals Godself also in creation (Ps 19:1; Rom 1:20) and the human heart (Rom 2:14). Though this revelation is understood to be "non-salvific," it is universal and, in the words of Gordon Lewis, a "globally normative truth," one bound neither to time nor culture.[2] Natural theology points to universal norms ("Moses' law, is a school master to help fallen people realize their need for mercy and grace") and these norms prepare the ground for the hearing of "special revelation."[3]

One urgent task for Christian theology and the world church lies in finding paths for healing the wounds inflicted when the gospel appeared in the guise of western culture and accompanying the western colonial endeavour. Pre-Christian cultural and religious heritage gains some validation within this schema because they too reflect, even if "in part," the universal truth of a creator God. Natural theology, in other words, appears to validate the pre-Christian experience and so perhaps provides a means to reappropriate the local cultural heritage. However, seeking a solution in natural theology is more ambiguous than may first appear. The key problem examined in this essay is the definition of "universality," which lies at the heart of claims regarding natural theology. It argues that reference to universality is a continuation of a western view of the world and so remains within a colonial pattern of intercultural engagement. Natural theology does not help address the experience of cultural alienation—it reinforces it.

To make this point, the following begins by defining natural theology and how this apologetic project leads to the idea of a "point of contact" between the gospel and local cultures. It then turns to the described experience of cultural alienation and to some arguments located within natural theology that seek to confirm the value of the pre-Christian religious and cultural heritage. Such arguments, however, are not straightforward and certainly not universal across cultures. The problem is further developed by reference to the experience and expectations of German missions and to how their

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theologies, see Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[2] Gordon R. Lewis, "General Revelation Makes Cross-Cultural Communication Possible," *ERT* 41(2017): 292–307, at 294.

[3] Lewis, "General Revelation Makes Cross-Cultural Communication Possible," 300.

mission method was grounded within a particular German view of the world. The essay ends by affirming the need to recover, for the sake of the faith, pre-Christian culture, but rejects the project of natural theology as a way forward.

NATURAL THEOLOGY: NON-RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE, UNIVERSAL AND RATIONAL

As one definition, John Macquarrie describes natural theology as "the knowledge of God … accessible to all rational human beings without recourse to any special or supposedly supernatural revelation."[4] Of note, first, is the deliberate contrast that forms between a "general" and a "special" revelation. Natural theology, it is argued, should bring us to a knowledge of God with reference only to what may be evident generally in nature, and apart from any notion of God's own acting in making God's own self known. Second, this knowledge develops through a process of human reasoning and takes account of mundane, everyday human experience. The rational human being can construct arguments for the divine by reassembling the clues left by the divine in the ordering of creation. However, while human experience is a key source of data, it is not experience as described by religious language and ritual. Reference to religious formulations and the accompanying practices would move the discussion into particular religious traditions. Rather, third, the value of this human experience lies in its generality. Natural theology identifies and constructs its arguments upon the possibility of a universal that is not itself dependent upon one's social, cultural, linguistic, or religious location. It is conceived to be transcultural and transhistorical reality. From these three elements—a natural knowledge (in deliberate distinction to any special revelation), reason, and the universal—natural theology constructs arguments for the nature of God and where God may be found.

One reason for this proposed distance from religious discourse and its identification with rational argument lies in the apologetic end towards which much Christian natural theology is directed. For William Alston, natural theology is "the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious

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[4] John Macquarrie, "Natural Theology," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Theology* (ed. Alister E. McGrath; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 402–405, at 402.

beliefs."[5] Natural theology seeks to undo barriers to belief. One such barrier developed in the post-Enlightenment era with the rise of the scientific method. It became necessary to prove the existence of God using methods reasonable to science so as to seem intelligible for those now suspicious of the authority given to the institutions of revealed theology. If it were possible to demonstrate the possibility of the divine within an account of the world acceptable to the scientific imagination, then special revelation would grant greater detail as to the nature of this God. Or, to continue with Macquarrie, "[i]n a secularized society, [natural theology] provides a bridge from everyday concerns to God-language and the experiences which such language reflects."[6] Natural theology serves this apologetic function, making the faith "intelligible" in terms that are not those of the faith itself. It proposes a ground external to the gospel upon which all people might stand. And, if all people may agree on this point, then the special revelation of God in Christ is a logical progression. This external ground establishes a "point of contact" between the faith and the wider cultural discourse.

While natural theology can appear as a very formal philosophical discussion, or in detailed conversation with the hard sciences, it equally speaks to a more mundane approach that appeals to a revelation of God in creation. This expands to include the missionary intent of a Christian natural theology. David Fergusson puts it this way, "the natural capacity of the human mind to raise theological questions can provide a *praeparatio evangelii*, a context within which the distinctive claims of the Christian faith can be presented and more easily heard."[7] This idea of a "preparation for the gospel" or of a "point of contact" that establishes a local entry point for the proclamation of the distinctive Christian gospel is a central end to which much Christian natural theology is turned. Indeed, as an oft-stated assumption of natural theology, special revelation, the explicit knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, would be impossible without a prior ground in general revelation. For example, James Barr maintains that the "pre-existing natural knowledge of God … makes it possible for humanity to receive the

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[5] William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 190.

[6] Macquarrie, "Natural Theology," 405.

[7] David Fergusson, "Types of Natural Theology," in *The Evolution of Rationality: Interdisciplinary Essays in Honor of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen* (ed. F. LeRon Shults; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 380–93, at 387.

additional 'special' revelation … The 'natural' knowledge of God, however dim, is an awareness of the true God, and provides a point of contact without which the special revelation would never be able to penetrate to people."[8] To deny a natural theology is to deny the very possibility of human beings ever knowing God. According to this position, the intelligibility of the faith necessitates a knowledge of God located in nature. It can also appear to be a way forward for those who in becoming Christian experience an alienation from their own land and place.

CHRISTIANISATION AND THE ONGOING TRAUMA OF ALIENATION FROM LOCAL CULTURES

Natural theology as establishing a "point of contact" or a "redemptive analogy" between the gospel and local culture directs our attention to the question of "contextualisation."[9] Contextualisation is a complex concept but is defined here simply as the possibility for the gospel to be spoken in local language and given social form in local institution and ritual. In a contested post-colonial context, the intelligibility of the faith means developing local theologies. There is a clear recognition, to quote Mogola Kamiali, that western missionaries "imported Christianity wrapped in their ideologies, cultural technologies, scientific cosmologies, and personal idiosyncrasies."[10] This resulted in the faith being identified as "foreign" or "white man's religion."[11] It could not be otherwise because there is no such thing as a gospel without context, without embodiment, a point to which we shall return. But this very locatedness of the western missionary message included

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[8] James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, *The Gifford Lectures for 1991: Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1.

[9] For the language of "redemptive analogy," see Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984); and Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1981). For a critical reading of this approach, one that denies the possibility of a "redemptive" analogy in general revelation and apart from special revelation, see Bruce A. Demarest and Richard J. Harpel, "Don Richardson's 'Redemptive Analogies' and the Biblical Idea of Revelation," *Bibliotheca sacra* 146 (1989): 330–40. Such terminology seems to be of limited usage within the literature. More common is that of "point of contact."

[10] Mogola Kamiali, "Missionary Attitudes: A Subjective and Objective Analysis," *MJT* 2 (1986): 145–73, at 145.

[11] Joe Gaqurae, "Indigenization as Incarnation: The Concept of a Melanesian Christ," in *Living Theology in Melanesia* (ed. J. D. May; Point Series 8; Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 1985), 207–17, at 208.

significant and often fateful consequences for the local embodiment of the gospel.

First, it meant the importation of questions and theological schemes which for Robert Hagesi, "are not relevant and intelligible to, or not even functional in, the various situations, cultures, and issues" within this local context.[12] Inasmuch as a materialist cosmology framed the interpretation of the gospel as presented by the western missionaries, the message often failed to address basic human needs in cultural worlds filled with spirits. William Longgar, for example, laments the way in which "borrowed theologies" ignore "the existential realities that Melanesians face every day: sickness and healing, spirit possession, high infant mortality rates, crop failures, barrenness among women, unemployment, job promotion, and other real life issues."[13] A Christianity that ignores, or that even denigrates local questions as superstition, produces something Longgar names "dysfunctional" Christianity. Downey, referring to the same problem, talks of a "spiritual vacuum" or a "superficial adherence to Christianity, which fails to penetrate to the deeper levels, a compartmentalisation, or, indeed, a conflict situation within the newly-converted Christian."[14] This speaks not simply to a failure in reconciling two views of the world, but to a fundamental conflict between the two, leading to a "split in the soul of the Christian, for whom the traditional worldview continues to remain central to his or her experience."[15] Patrick Dodson and Jacinta Elston, two Aboriginal theologians, extend the point, noting how "[i]mportant links with cultural beliefs and practice can be placed under tension as believers can experience church practices that separate them from key family, social and spiritual values. As Aboriginal people enter into the life of a Christian church community, they can find themselves compelled to leave their culture 'at the door'."[16] One finds this

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[12] Robert Hagesi, "Towards a Melanesian Christian Theology," *MJT* 1 (1985), 17–24, at 17.

[13] William Kenny Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology: A Response to Foreign Theologies," in *Living in the Family of Jesus: Critical Contextualization in Melanesia and Beyond* (ed. William Kenny Longgar and Tim Meadowcroft; Archer Studies in Pacific Christianity; Auckland: Archer Press, 2016), 29–56, at 31. On this point, one often finds reference to the discussion in Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology* 10 (1982): 35–47.

[14] James Downey, "Baptism and the Elemental Spirits of the Universe," *MJT* 12 (1996): 7–23, at 8.

[15] Downey, "Baptism and the Elemental Spirits of the Universe," 8.

[16] Patrick L. Dodson, Jacinta K. Elston, and Brian F. McCoy, "Leaving Culture at the Door:

exact point repeated within Africa, Asia, and Latin America to the extent that Tinyiko Maluleke can conclude, "[t]o be truly Christian means not to be truly African."[17] This speaks to a self-alienation and informs how the Christian and the Christian community lives in relation to its social and cultural context.

"Denationalisation" is one way of naming this experience of alienation. This refers to the removal of a convert or a community from the wider social context by radically changing social patterns, institutions, and behaviours. The expectation of sometimes radical social and cultural discontinuity resulted from a noted incompatibility between certain cultural practices (widow burning, head hunting, polygamy, slavery, etc.) and the moral demands of the gospel. However, while such examples of discontinuity may be clear, the process of "Christianisation," as it was called, encompassed a wider range of changes to the social order, its institutions, and the political and economic landscape. Dick Avi, for example, laments the loss of "some very fundamental and noble values, or traditions" when indigenous Christians were "taught to throw away all their traditional, and customary,

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Aboriginal Perspectives on Christian Belief and Practice," *Pacifica* 19 (2006): 249–62, at 250. See also John Kadiba, "In Search of a Melanesian Theology," in *The Gospel is Not Western: Black Theologies from the Southwest Pacific* (ed. Gary W. Trompf; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 139–47, at 141: "Theologies and Christian traditions in Melanesia remain foreign in character and expression. Melanesians who have had a Christian religious experience have been absorbed into church structures and traditions that are foreign to them. They have expressed their new religious experience in and through religious symbols that are exotic to them. So, in religious experience and religious symbolism, Melanesian Christians have been alienated from their traditional ways. Hence, there is a foreignness about their Christianity."

[17] Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "Christ in Africa: The Influence of Multi-Culturity on the Experience of Christ," *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 8 (1994): 49–64, at 53. For an example from Hong Kong, see Archie C. C. Lee, "Cross-Textual Hermeneutics and Identity in Multi-Scriptural Asia," in *Christian Theology in Asia* (ed. Sebastian C. H. Kim; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 179–204, at 198–99. Desmond Tutu, "Whither African Theology," in *Christianity in Independent Africa* (ed. Edward W. Fasholé-Luke et al.; London: Rex Collings, 1978), 364–69, at 366, can even state: "With part of himself [the African] has been compelled to pay lip service to Christianity as understood, expressed and preached by the white man. But with an ever-greater part of himself, a part he has often been ashamed to acknowledge openly and which he has struggled to repress, he has felt that his Africanness was being violated. The white man's largely cerebral religion was hardly touching the depths of his African soul: he was being redeemed of sins he did not believe he had committed; he was given answers, and often splendid answers, to questions he had not asked."

practices, ceremonies, symbols, songs, and dances, with the attendant spirituality, and religious, or cultural, beliefs."[18] This reflects what was often a complete disregard of local cultural substance on behalf of western missionaries.

Now distanced from traditional ways of displaying citizenship and even prohibited from fulfilling one's duties to the national community, the convert and the Christian community needed to form a new society.[19] This was accomplished in a number of ways. One approach consisted of the Christian community withdrawing from the social and political world, enclosing itself within its newly developed cultural world. In doing this it became "a foreign body in its own people," a church "beside the people."[20] This only entrenched the foreignness of the faith as local communities opted out of public discourse.

A second approach assumed a protectionist stance. This occurred when the foreign missionary stressed the importance of (some) traditional values to the extent that the local communities were placed outside the emerging economies and political narratives that developed in the encounter with western colonial forces.[21] This again succeeded in "alienating" the Christian community from the wider cultural forces; it stymied natural cultural development by linking the embodiment of the faith with a traditional past. The community was always referred to this past.

A third approach *de facto* maintained parallel belief systems. Some may apply the term "syncretism" to this concern.[22] However, insofar as the faith

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[18] Dick Avi, "Contextualisation in Melanesia," *MJT* 4 (1988): 7–22, at 16.

[19] For example, W. V. Lucas, "The Christian Approach to Non-Christian Customs," in *Essays Catholic and Missionary* (ed. Edmund Robert Morgan; London: SPCK, 1928), 114–51, at 118, noted how "[c]ustom will demand his participation with his relatives and kindred in much of which he may feel a real distrust, and yet, if he refuses to be associated with his fellow tribesmen in what are regarded as essential acts of citizenship and duties to the community, he begins to be in danger of cutting himself off completely, and at the end becoming an outcast."

[20] Karl Hartenstein, "Adaptation or Revolution," *The Student World* 28 (1935): 308–27, at 317.

[21] Esau Tuza, "Cultural Suppression? Not Quite!: A Case in Solomon Islands Methodism," *Catalyst* 7 (1977): 106–26.

[22] Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology," 49: "Often they are tempted to revert to the primal gods in times of sickness and the new yam harvest. Furthermore, one can see the outworking of traditional religion creeping into the church and resulting in either apostasy or syncretism." Christopher Kouha, "A Comparison Between the God of the Bible

failed to address everyday questions of human existence within a particular local cultural and historical context, it follows that these questions would continue to be addressed by traditional and established remedies. Writing in 1968 and in the context of post-independence Nigeria, Bolaji Idowu notes how the failure to take account of indigenous beliefs and customs, and the presentation of Jesus Christ as a "completely new God who had had nothing to do with the past of Africa," destroyed any potential bridging between the pre-Christian religious and cultural world to the new creation with Jesus Christ at its centre.[23] As the faith entered speaking in "strange tongues" and without any thought of translation, Christians came to:

> live ambivalent spiritual lives. Christianity to them is a fashionable religion which has the habit of beginning and ending within the walls of a church building; it does not reach those vital areas of the personal needs of Africans. Thus, it is possible for an African to sing lustily in Church, 'Other refuge have I none', while still carrying an amulet somewhere on his person, or being able to go out of the Church straight to his diviner, without feeling that he is betraying any principle.[24]

While these three approaches may appear different, they stem from the same root: from a disconnect between expected forms of the Christian faith and the traditional local systems of identity, belonging, and citizenship.

Such attempts to create and maintain Christian cultural worlds did not occur in a vacuum; they drew upon an assumed and basic identification between western culture and the Christian gospel. Whatever the affirmation

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and the Tannese Primal Gods: An Apologetic to Educate Tannese Christians," *MJT* 31 (2015): 220–84, at 220. On the need for a critical syncretism, see John Roxborogh, "Loyalty to Christ: Conversion, Contextualization, and Religious Syncretism," in Longgar and Meadowcroft, *Living in the Family of Jesus*, 345–58.

[23] E. Bolaji Idowu, "The Predicament of the Church in Africa," in *Christianity in Tropical Africa: Studies Presented and Discussed at the Seventh International African Seminar, University of Ghana, April 1965* (ed. Christian G. Baëta; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 417–37, at 433.

[24] Idowu, "The Predicament of the Church in Africa," 433. See also Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 15–30. This chapter refers to Jaime Bulatao's concept of a "split-level Christianity." The problem, however, rests in how Bulatao sets the problem as a contest with a set Christian (Catholic) view against a traditional view. This assumes a fundamental direction from the traditional to the Catholic reinforcing the notion that the two are properly incommensurate, and the task is transitioning from one to the other.

of local values, to become Christian included assuming a particular spiritual posture developed within the West over a sustained period of time. For Aboriginal scholar and Baptist minister, Graham Paulson, the evangelisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait people consisted of the "telling of the story of the gospel as it was acculturated in the western world, and translated into the subcultures of denominational religious institutions."[25] The language of "subcultures" in reference to denominational differences is not accidental; it refers to a framing aesthetic which names theological claims and their corresponding social embodiment in modes of ministry, rituals, hymnology, and practices. To continue with Paulson, "Aboriginal people have been obliged to adopt western styles of worship and church leadership."[26] This includes an imported reality of schism, one which continually refers questions of diversity in practices and theological questioning back to Europe. To again quote Dick Avi, "[t]he old conflicts of the Reformation in Western Christendom had been resurrected in Melanesian Christianity. In the religious sense, the people are alienated from their society, and are living in Europe or America."[27] In other words, the experience of alienation includes within it a consistent referral back to the West as properly framing discussions concerning the local embodiment of the faith.

Nor it is issue confined to the past. It continues to be an ongoing concern in relation to globalisation. Anthony Giddens defines globalisation as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa."[28] Such intensification is, of course, often unidirectional: social, political, economic, or even climate related events within much of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania fail to attract much attention. Or, as Longaar suggests, "when the rules of reciprocity are overlooked and a dominant group imposes its values and philosophies on the receiving group, an unhealthy culture of subservience is created."[29] This applies to the faith itself, whereby "dominant Christian groups" continue to impose, albeit in a less direct manner, "their theologies on receiving groups,

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[25] Graham Paulson, "Towards an Aboriginal Theology," *Pacifica* 19 (2006): 310–20, at 311.

[26] Paulson, "Towards an Aboriginal Theology," 311.

[27] Avi, "Contextualisation in Melanesia," 16.

[28] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press, 1990), 64.

[29] Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology," 26.

with a resulting tendency to ethnocentrism, ignorance, and intellectual dishonesty on the part of the dominant Christian groups."[30] Even as the numerical dominance of Christianity is now located in the global South, the West maintains a controlling voice, not the least though its financial resources.

When thinking through the effect of western colonisation on the local appropriation of the gospel, one could emphasise the position articulated by the sober voice of evangelical Latin American missiologist Orlando Costas. In forthright terms, he states that the "missionary enterprise has been used as a justification and a cover for the domination of people. The interrelation between mission, technology, and imperialism is well known. The expansionistic ambitions of militarily and economically powerful countries have always been accompanied by a missionary interest."[31] This approach locates mission within a wider geopolitical account. Religious change succeeds precisely in denationalisation and so facilitates changes in national allegiance.

While there is truth in this account, its focus on the political and economic shifts attention away from colonialism as including a range of cultural accompaniments deemed necessary to becoming "Christian."[32] Idowu states that:

> the Church in Africa came into being with prefabricated theology, liturgies and traditions. In the matter of Christian ethics, the converts found themselves in the position of those early converts before the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15): "Unless you are circumcised after the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved"; and that is virtually the position today.[33]

Note the link between theology, liturgy, tradition, and ethics. Christian identity itself traded on a form of cultural proselytism,[34] one embedded within the mundane elements of church life: practices, rituals, hymnology,

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[30] Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology," 26.

[31] Orlando E. Costas, *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1974), 245. See further Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 58–69.

[32] For more on this, see John G. Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 164–75.

[33] Idowu, "The Predicament of the Church in Africa," 426.

[34] See the short commentary in Polonhou S. Pokawin, "Interaction Between Indigenous and Christian Traditions," in *The Gospel is Not Western: Black Theologies from the Southwest Pacific* (ed. Gary W. Trompf; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 23–31.

liturgies, creeds, etc. These contributed to a process of deracination: the uprooting of local peoples from the native environment and culture.[35] Pulling all these threads together, Keiti Ann Kanongata'a names the peoples of the Pacific as having been "raped of their cultural honour."[36] This very strong language speaks to a forcible removal of what makes a person a person. Terry LeBlanc, speaking from a Native American context, notes how, living with a "false belief that a relationship with their Creator required them to reject their own identity and adopt another—a European one," subjected "Indigenous people to deep-rooted self-doubt at best, and self-hatred—a death more heinous than their physical eradication—at worst."[37] Cameroonian Catholic theologian, Engelbert Mveng, names this experience one of "anthropological poverty."

> When persons are deprived not only of goods and possessions of a material, moral, intellectual, cultural, or sociological order, but of everything that makes up the foundation of their being-in-the-world and the specificity of their 'ipseity' [individual identity, selfhood] as individual, society, and history—when persons are bereft of their identity, their dignity, their freedom, their thought, their history, their language, their faith universe, and their basic creativity, deprived of all their rights, their hopes, their ambitions—they sink into a kind of poverty which no longer concerns only exterior or interior goods or possessions but strikes at the very being, essence, and dignity of the human person.[38]

A person and a community become unmoored, without an anchor and identity, and so dependent on another history to provide a story and a meaning.[39] Mveng extends this to include poverty and systemic racism. In

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[35] See, for example, the judgment of John Henry Okullu, *Church and Politics in East Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Publishing House, 1974), 8: "The missionaries who brought Christianity, rid Africa of all its traditional values and religious concepts in order to have a clean plate on which to put the new faith."

[36] Keiti Ann Kanongata'a, "Why Contextual?" *PJT* n.s. 27 (2002): 21–40, at 25.

[37] Terry LeBlanc, "Mission: An Indigenous Perspective," *Direction* 43 (2014): 152–65, at 152.

[38] Engelbert Mveng, "Improverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa in the Third World," in *Paths of African Theology* (ed. Rosino Gibellini; London: SCM, 1994), 154–65, at 156.

[39] Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 51, for example, notes how "theological consciousness presupposes religious tradition, and tradition requires memory, and memory is integral to identity: without memory we have no past, and if we have no past, we lose our identity."

other words, this poverty extends to corruption, violence, suicide, and to the disposability of people.

Keiti Ann's statement comes from an article concerned with contextualisation. Contextualisation, in other words, is viewed as a proper avenue for the healing of cultural trauma.[40] It is conceived as a way of re-establishing a traditional foundation and story, one which "will uplift us from our powerlessness to our God-given dignity."[41] Such uplift, by extension, will help heal the trauma of the devaluation of the cultural past and the accompanying anthropological poverty with its ongoing acute socio-political consequences.

THE AMBIGUITIES OF USING NATURAL THEOLOGY TO IDENTIFY THE GOD BEFORE THE MISSIONARIES

Christian voices throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania lament as one this loss of cultural heritage in the process of becoming and being Christian. The foreignness of the faith to a local context, its unintelligibility, is a problem for which natural theology is seen as some form of solution. However, though the role western colonisation has played in the process is evident, less evident, perhaps, is the potential role played by claims to natural theology.

One way of healing the trauma of cultural discontinuity lies in the recovery of local values and tradition. Contextualisation, so understood, includes reforging some continuity between the contemporary embodiment of the Christian faith and the cultural traditions and histories of the local context. Natural theology, so the argument goes, assists this process by establishing a theological bridge between the pre-Christian understanding of God and the contemporary embodiment of the faith. It begins with a position such as outlined by David Fergusson. After an extended overview of different approaches to natural theology, he concludes: "Some of the Psalms and wisdom literature appeal to patterns of common experience and observation that are universal and provide a trans-cultural awareness of God."[42] This is an appeal to biblical warrant and assumes that the text affirms a knowledge

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[40] As Avi, "Contextualisation in Melanesia," 16, suggests, indigenisation was undertaken "in the hope of recovering the broken ties between … their own people and culture." See also Gaqurae, "Indigenization as Incarnation," 208.

[41] Kanongata'a, "Why Contextual?" 25.

[42] Fergusson, "Types of Natural Theology," 392.

of God undetermined by any cultural heritage. It is often linked to God's act of creating, and the ongoing work of the Spirit in creation. However, such an approach does not simply refer to creation, to reflecting upon the stars as God's handiwork. It immediately turns to "culture" as the location of God's acting, to local law and custom, even while the value of this knowledge lies in its being transcultural. Though it is unclear how one can move so quickly from creation to culture, the "dim" knowledge of God found in human cultures constitutes the point of contact between this culture and the word of God. Local law and custom served to prepare the way for the particular word of Jesus Christ.

One sees these types of arguments providing some validation of traditional cultural heritage. William Longgar, for example, draws a direct connection between the Christian God and the spiritual history of Melanesian communities. To quote:

> Melanesians' own unique stories about this immutable, gracious, holy, and merciful God who journeyed with their ancestors between time and space. For years, Melanesians wanted to know this God, thus they gave him local names that could only explain in religious terms who this invisible power was. Until the time that a fuller revelation of Jesus Christ through the Gospel message enabled them to come face to face with the one who was once hidden from them.[43]

Drawing on Galatians 3:23–25, he describes "[t]raditional Melanesian spirituality" as "the 'school master' or 'guardian' or 'custodian' of the Melanesians until they came of age to inherit the truth of the Gospel and share in their inheritance in Christ."[44] This suggests that traditional culture may be understood as having a similar function to the Jewish Law for the early Jewish-Christian community. Not only was the Christian God present within local culture, but the culture itself, with its law and custom, prepared the people for the entrance of the gospel. Because western missionaries

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[43] Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology," 38. Kamiali, "Missionary Attitudes,"153, observes the claim made within Albert M. Kiki's book, *Kiki: Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime* (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1968), that "the ten commandments were already in existence among his people, before missionaries put their foot on our land."

[44] Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology", 29. For a development of this idea using Gal 4:1–5, see John M. Hitchen, "Mission to Primal Religious Groups in a Postmodern Context," in *Mission and Postmodernities* (ed. Rolv Olsen; London: Regnum, 2011), 139–71.

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approached traditional religious practices with disdain, considering them to be "animistic and 'primitive'," they unable to see how "the almighty and loving God could ever be in Melanesia before the missionaries set foot on the shores of that land."[45] Any beginning point that demonises the local culture, fails to appreciate where points of contact might be found within the local culture. By comparison, Longgar holds that "every primal society and its culture bears the fingerprint of God and awaits the fuller revelation of the Gospel."[46] The benefit of this position lies precisely in the theological account of continuity with the cultural past it creates.

However, not everyone accepts this strong affirmation of God's presence within pre-Christian culture. Ma'afu Palu, for example, takes up this claim that the Christian God was "already worshipped by our pre-Christian ancestors here in the Pacific," that these gods, whether they be "a shark, a tree, and so forth, were cultural expressions of the God the missionaries brought to the Pacific."[47] For him, whatever the religious practice and belief of the ancestors, "they were not, in any reasonable sense, worshipping the God of the Bible, the God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."[48] He grounds his conclusion in what he describes as both "historical evidence" and "biblical statement."[49] Specifically, he grounds this conclusion in a typical account of natural theology. Referring to the nature Psalms (e.g., Ps 19:1; and 33:6) and Romans 1, he notes that the general revelation of God in creation leads not to a saving knowledge due to our fallen natures. The opposite is true: the knowledge of God in creation condemns us. Instead of worshipping the living God, humanity turned to the idolatry of worshipping created things.[50] In terms of the religious pre-history, Palu finds little by way of continuity with the Christian gospel—and he does this using rather traditional arguments for natural theology. Local culture is disciplined by the law to bring us both to a knowledge of our own guilt; the law serves to 'civilise' local cultures and opens space for to be able to hear the gospel.

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[45] Avi, "Contextualisation in Melanesia," 15.

[46] Longgar, "Authenticating Melanesian Biblical Theology," 27.

[47] Ma'afu Palu, "Distinguishing the Religion of Our Pre-Christian Ancestors from the Religion of the Missionaries," *MJT* 26 (2010): 91–99, at 91.

[48] Palu, "Distinguishing the Religion of Our Pre-Christian Ancestors," 92.

[49] Palu, "Distinguishing the Religion of Our Pre-Christian Ancestors," 93.

[50] Palu, "Distinguishing the Religion of Our Pre-Christian Ancestors," 94–95.

A second argument for identifying the presence of God before the arrival of the missionaries is through the idea of a "high-God."[51] Ferdinand Nwaigbo argues that, while African languages ascribed many names to God, there was "only one Supreme God in the belief of the people … The fact that the missionaries who came to Africa brought a new God is not a tenable idea. In fact, God has been alive and active in Africa even before the arrival of the white missionaries."[52] The claim, again located within an account of creation, is that no matter the variety of ways for naming God they all name the same God—the creator God who is the God of Jesus Christ. This is, of course, a key missionary strategy, especially in the context of translating the Bible into vernacular languages. The translator finds the local word for this high-god and uses this for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Precisely in this translation process, however, it becomes clear that not every culture or religion has a high-god. While what was known as "primal" societies might well claim a form of high-god, non-personalist accounts of the divine common in Asia, such as Buddhism, for example, include no reference to any god, high or otherwise.[53] In other words, reference to a high-god is not a universal, true across all cultures for all times. If we acknowledge this and still want to maintain that our local culture did have a high-god, then we must also argue for a certain selectivity in this natural revelation of God. Nor, even if a high-god may be named, is it self-evident that this god is good. In relation to the Melanesian context, Marilyn Rowsome, notes that, "[i]f there is a concept of a high god, or creative spirits, they are the object of legend and myth, not worship, for they are inactive, and unapproachable."[54] Rufus Pech makes the same observation in relation to finding a name for God for a local language translation of the Bible in Melanesia.[55] The process is ambiguous and no single option presents itself. On the one hand, we may

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[51] On the idea of a "high-God," see Wilhelm Schmidt, "The Nature, Attributes and Worship of the Primitive High God," in *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (ed. William Armand Lessa and Evon Zartman Vogt; London: Harper and Row, 1965), 21–33.

[52] Ferdinand Nwaigbo, "Cosmic Christology and Eco-Theology in Africa," *AFER* 53 (2011): 437–61, at 444–45. For a Melanesian example, see Roy B. Yosef, "Pre-Gospel Belief in Vanuatu," *MJT* 14 (1998): 69–76, at 70–71.

[53] One could also refer here to the First Nations peoples of Australia. See Gideon C. Goosen, "Christian and Aboriginal Interface in Australia," *TS* 60 (1999): 72–94, at 82–86.

[54] Marilyn Rowsome, "Melanesian Traditional Religion," *MJT* 17 (2001): 36–56, at 41.

[55] Rufus Pech, "The Name of God in Melanesia," *MJT* 1 (1985): 29–45.

read the desire to find a high-god in our religious histories as the result of a Christian projection upon those histories, conforming those histories to supposed transcultural natural knowledge of God. On the other hand, the identification of a high-god established a norm that helped suppress an additional plurality of spiritual beings, and attendant forms of spirituality and ritual, found within local cosmology.[56]

The identification of a high-god, in other words, prompted a related dismissal of the wider culture, its cosmologies and associated spiritualities. As Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt point out, arguments for natural theology do not seek "tree spirits, trolls, or mermaids."[57] Rather, "[d]ue to their Christian or post-Christian background," they seek a "generic theism, Christian theism, and scientific naturalism as the default options, and concentrate on these in their argumentation, leaving aside a rich diversity of views from, for example, Mormonism, Jainism, and Wicca."[58] Natural theology, due to its historic Christian roots, does not attend to other religions as they are, but looks for a determined form, which corresponds to a theist or deist view of the world. The complex cosmologies of primal or indigenous accounts of the divine are simply not entertained by traditional natural theology. Local experience, as codified also in spiritualities, religious practices and institutions, customs, and laws, are reinterpreted and evaluated according to this idea of a single high-god. It is a universality that imposes a certain pattern upon religious history and ignores what does not fit within that pattern as not belonging to a universal knowledge of the divine. Even though it assumes the character of the local, it smooths out or even nullifies local particularities. This includes, by extension, a lack of detailed reflection on the various social institutions, language, rituals, spiritualities, and practices, grounded in and formed in relation to those beliefs.

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[56] See Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 97–101. Here Bediako notes the difficulty Christian scholars, of both western and African origin, have had with the plurality of spiritual beings in the primal imagination, and how reference to the one transcendent God serves to suppress rather than address that plurality.

[57] Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, "Naturalizing Natural Theology," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 6 (2016): 355–61, at 357.

[58] De Cruz and De Smedt, "Naturalizing Natural Theology," 357.

GERMAN MISSIONS AND THE PRIMORDIAL TIES OF CREATION

These brief examples serve only to highlight that reference using natural theology to establish some connection between the local form of the Christian faith and the pre-Christian religious and cultural heritage is an interpretive and value-laden endeavour: it is possible to use the same arguments, built on the same biblical texts, to both validate and condemn local cultures. Often, such as the claims made regarding a high-god, the argument appears predetermined and local experiences forced into a pattern not their own. Indeed, to develop the point further, this predetermination is linked to an account of a universal and normative experience, and that is an experienced defined by a view of the world derived from the western tradition. To illustrate this contention, the following two sections examine the missionary theology of German missions during the early and mid-twentieth century.

The connecting point between natural theology and this missionary endeavour lies in the infamous debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner regarding natural theology. While many have examined and commented upon this discussion, none has pointed to where Brunner himself locates his argument: in German mission theory. That is, Brunner understands his argument for natural theology to come from a missionary concern for western societies that were experiencing the end of Christendom and the rise of paganism and secularism.[59] As it was a missionary concern, Brunner drew on two mission theorists: Bruno Gutmann and Siegfried Knak.[60]

Bruno Gutmann (1876–1966) was a missionary and mission theorist who lived and worked for thirty-six years (1902–1938) among the Chagga people in the Kilimanjaro area of central Africa. His basic position was informed by the *Volkschristianiserung* (conversion of whole people groups) approach to missions. This approach, developed by the likes of Gustav Warneck (1834–1910), was concerned primarily with the question of indigenisation. To cite Warneck, mission should seek to implant "Christianity into the foreign soil of heathen nations in such a way that it takes root like a native plant and

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[59] For further on this, see John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity,* Missio Dei*, Karl Barth and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 166–72.

[60] Emil Brunner, "Die Bedeutung der Missionarischen Erfahrung für die Theologie," in *Die deutsche evangelische Heidenmission: Jahrbuch 1933 der vereinigten deutschen Missionskonferenzen* (Hamburg: Selbstverlag der Missionskonferenzen, 1933), 3–11, at 10.

grows to be a native tree."[61] This meant, first, rejecting an approach based in individual conversion because this removes people from their local culture and social institutions; second, rejecting a simple transplantation of the institutional church and the baptising of groups of people into this church; and third, rejecting mission strategies that confused christianisation and western civilisation. Instead, to christianise a people was to naturalise the faith, and this required the christianisation of the local language, customs, and social ties.

Schooled in this tradition, Gutmann sought an indigenous Christianity rooted in the *Volkstum*, or the essential character of the people. Gutmann accomplished this through natural theology, and by naming where God had left a permanent witness to Godself in creation. Such a witness he found in "primordial ties." Gutmann regarded primordial ties as valid across time and determinative for every human relationship and community; they were part of the "the fabric of being" and revealed the "order of creation." Gutmann stressed three ties in particular: clan, and so based in blood relationships; neighbourhood, and so based in the same soil; the third one was age groups, and so based in the bonds of hierarchy and social organisation. These three ties, according to Gutmann, were part of the *imago Dei*, and necessary to our maturation into full human beings.

Through these primordial ties God revealed Godself and dwelt with humanity. Gutmann regards both the church and the primordial ties as "divine creations." They are necessarily set in relation to one another because only together do they represent "the fullness of God's immanence in the world of human beings."[62] The primordial ties give revelation form, and it is only through this form or embodiment that revelation can be known. For this reason, Gutmann opposes western civilisation. The West had succumbed to an atomistic view of life, one in which every person was an independent individual, and money had come to replace brother, sister, and neighbour. In dissolving the primordial ties through which God worked, the West was no longer able properly to understand the kingdom of God. A key missionary task, therefore, lay in preserving these ties because they were fundamental to any human relationship with God.

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[61] Gustav Warneck, "Thoughts on the Missionary Century," *Missionary Review of the World* 23 (1900): 413–17, at 416.

[62] Bruno Gutmann, *Gemeindeaufbau aus dem Evangelium: Grundsätzliches für Mission und Heimatkirche* (Leipzig: Evangelische Lutherisch Mission, 1925), 15.

This meant studying the language, customs, and culture of a people. Custom is here defined as how people live together, the shape of their political structures and laws, and their expressions in art and science. The body of Christ, which comes into being through this process, is called a "Volkskirche," a people's church. This was not an imported foreign structure with a foreign history and foreign political divisions but an independent and self-governing community, fully indigenous because informed by the nature of its primordial ties to creation.

This approach to mission, which informed German mission theory through the first half of the twentieth century, is rightly commended for a couple of reasons. First, it was overt in warning against the dangers of confusing the gospel with western culture, the effects of which remain all too evident today. This was a deliberate attempt to name and avoid the pitfalls of replicating western divisions and of uprooting individuals and communities from their social milieu. Second, it was intentional in seeking a local embodiment of the faith. These missionaries did not intend to transplant a German church into foreign soil, but to grow a local church, one with significant continuity with the cultural past. Local custom and law, however fallen it may be, was nonetheless a necessary part of the orders of creation and essential to life in Christ. To quote Stephen Neill, "[o]n many essential matters Gutmann was right; missionaries and colonial authorities alike have often paid too little attention to the background of native thought, to those presuppositions which do not readily find expression in speech, but nevertheless colour and determine the whole of life."[63] They valued local cultures as properly part of the embodiment of the life of Christ and, especially when considered in relation to other missionary approaches, this approach proved less destructive for local life and culture. They accomplished this via a robust and sustained theological account of natural theology.

THE DIRECTED SUBSTANCE OF A NATURAL THEOLOGY

So far, so good. German missions remained intentional in preserving local cultures because God worked through these primordial ties. It did this based on a number of associated assumptions, the first of which was that each culture reflected the essential national character of a people. However, while

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[63] Stephen Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Missions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 401.

each people had an essential character, by no means were those characters equal. There was clear hierarchy, with western Christian culture and, in particular, German culture standing at the top. This is illustrated by reference to Siegfried Knak (1875–1955), the second missiologist identified by Brunner. Knak is interesting because he sets out a clear pathway from this idea of local contextualisation and God working though universal orders in creation to the affirmation of Hitler as an evangelist. If God works through culture, and if every culture has a unique character, it follows that the re-establishing of German pride and culture and so the primordial ties of "blood and soil" would lead to a re-encounter between God and the German people.

His logic is as follows: mission and especially German mission, has long recognised the "significance of national values and traditions for humanity and history."[64] Mission does not destroy these values. Quite the opposite, those who hold the greatest guilt for such local destruction Knak names as western civilisation, global trade, global politics, and the industrialisation of Africa and Asia. These forces stand guilty of "atomizing the nations in order to create willing 'worker peoples' for harvesting the raw materials of the other continents; and the cultural imperialism seeking to subject all of humanity to the influence of the western lifestyle and the western world of ideas."[65] The German approach, in other words, developed also as an overt rejection of what they saw as Anglo-American imperialism. The better approach in the German mind began with a recognition that God has blessed each people with a "*unique national character*." The missionary task consisted also of countering "these destructive and disintegrative forces by helping distant people groups to recognise and take ownership of their own unique national or racial attributes."[66] Should these peoples abandon their local character in favour of **"**becoming spiritual devotees of western culture," then they become "unable to fully to receive and to grasp the Gospel."[67] Mission seeks to develop each local national character because that character is necessary for maturation in the gospel. Each church needs to be embodied in local form.

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[64] Siegfried Knak, "Mission und Kirche im Dritten Reich," in *Das Buch der deutschen Weltmission* (ed. Julius Richter; Gotha: Leopold Klotz Verlag, 1935), 240–44, at 243.

[65] Knak, "Mission und Kirche im Dritten Reich," 243.

[66] Knak, "Mission und Kirche im Dritten Reich," 243.

[67] Knak, "Mission und Kirche im Dritten Reich," 243.

Though Knak developed this logic in missionary terms, it is a logic which comes out of German self-understanding of its own national character, which was exacerbated by the humility of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. All peoples have their own God-given character, and this character is necessary to the growth of this people in its faith. Hitler and the Third Reich sought to safeguard and develop this German national identity. Because God works through this national character, and because Hitler is trying to restore this character to its proper authority, the experience of Christian missions can "reassure the church so that she can approve of the intentions of the Third Reich *joyfully* and with a clear conscience. For the Third Reich intends to embody the values and traditions of the German nation."[68] The church should happily say yes to the totalitarian claims of the Nazi state because by encouraging the local character it is drawing the church into closer ties with God.[69]

There is much to agree with in the German position. Yes, the embodiment of the faith requires an embodiment in local form. We are not to destroy local cultures, creating a poverty that causes the local to become subjugated to other self-interested global players. We are to affirm local customs and law and to discern where these too lead the church into truth about Jesus Christ. But we also need to consider how this developed account of contextualisation came to support an evil ideology and state apparatus.

First, basic to natural theology is the idea of a general revelation, universal and so transcultural and transhistorical, and accessible to every human being.[70] The key universal driving the German account is the idea of

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[68] Knak, "Mission und Kirche im Dritten Reich," 240–44.

[69] Siegfried Knak, "Totalitätsanspruch des Staates und der Totalitätsanspruch Gottes an die Völker," *NAMZ* 10, no. 12 (1933): 401–21, at 406.

[70] James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology,* addresses Karl Barth's rejection of natural theology, denying "any essential or necessary link between German National Socialism and natural theology" because he finds no sense of universality or of rationality in the National Socialist position. However, Barr, as is all too common with departicularised theological discourses, ignores the named connections between the missionary concerns of contextual theology and the claims of natural theology. It was exactly the idea of the *Volk* as that which constituted the universal, the mundane experience of every human being, and as the substance of human experience that could be rationally deliberated. Furthermore, Barr's own work simply privileges his own theological account above that of the Germans and in that privileging claims some form of universal and non-theological norm. And that is precisely the point: all such claims to normativity disguise the cultural location of the claim itself, but when viewed from different locales the claim's original location becomes evident.

the *Volk*. *Volk* is a word with no adequate equivalent in English. *Volk* speaks to a particular German experience. It is an old word, but takes on great cultural significance in Germany during the Romantic period (from the end of the eighteenth and through the nineteenth centuries). As a reaction to the materialism of Enlightenment Rationalism, German Romanticism included a deeper sense of spirit and mystery. This shift is evident within the idea of *Volk*. As developed by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), *Volk* referred to an ideal group: to those who were uneducated and rural; those without high culture. This group captured the original spirit of the whole people group. This was "a living organism comprising all individualities within a nation. It was the result of a historical process (*Werden*), uniting the present generation with those long since dead and those still to be born in a metaphysical unity."[71] Every *Volk* had its own separate and unique identity and these were maintained through language and locality. Collective identity was more important than individual identity, and the local language was the only way that one may pray to God.[72] The *Volk*, in other words, was a certain understanding of culture: one tied, first, to a language group, and second to the location of these people, to the land. The identity of this people was pristine and complete at its inception, and the further this people drifted from their land and language, the more they lost their national character.[73] Reference to the essential character of this people is always backwards to this imagined and ideal past and to the uneducated and rural, to those without external contacts which might dilute that essential character.

In response, first, to treat this account of the *Volk* and of the primordial ties as a universal disguises its roots within German culture and national identity. It followed the patterns of a German understanding of social

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[71] Klaus Fiedler, *Christianity and African Culture: Conservative German Protestant Missionaries in Tanzania, 1900–1940* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 14.

[72] Fiedler, *Christianity and African Culture*, 14.

[73] For a further example of the cultural location of this approach, see Bruce L. McCormack, "Why Should Theology be Christocentric?: Christology and Metaphysics in Paul Tillich and Karl Barth," *WTJ* 45 (2010): 42–80, at 51. McCormack notes how the German idealists, in seeking "a real knowledge of the real world," posited "the existence of an original point of identity. To know this original point of identity is to know the unity which continues to underlie subject and object, even in their separation in human consciousness … The purpose of his early *Identitätsphilosophie* was to overcome the gap between the unconscious productivity of nature and the conscious activity of thought by locating the origins of both in one and the same source."

organisation, order, and propriety, and included a strong sense of western superiority. To quote Hans-Werner Gensichen, though Gutmann sought to indigenise the gospel, his "own particular system of indigenisation" reflected a cultural conservatism that amounted to "German nationalism in disguise" and confirmed German superiority.[74] This understanding of culture, in other words, was far from a universal: it developed out of the German experience of its own nationhood as interpreted through the lenses of romanticism and idealism.

Second, with these cultural roots came a particular value system for evaluating what properly belonged to the primordial ties and how these ties might be organised and refined. Basic to this was village life and established tribal systems. With the original *Volk* in the historical past, the repristination of the primordial ties meant a concern with origins and with directing local peoples to this past. It meant valuing practices as they were prior to any encounter with modern life or western civilisation.

On the other hand, it meant that the missionary already had a pattern in mind. The move to indigeneity was not modelled on local life but on an established pattern drawn from the prior German experience. This resulted in a seemingly arbitrary norm regarding which cultural practices were to be retained and which were to be excised. Hilko Schomerus, for example, observes how some missionaries cherished the social patterns of tribal peoples while criticising the Chinese approach to extended family or the Indian caste system.[75] These decisions appeared to be arbitrary, but were grounded in the cultural value system assumed within the idea of a *Volk*.

One theological mechanism for this process of cultural evaluation resided in the distinction between law and gospel—one derived from the Lutheran tradition. The natural becomes identified with the law and the law is understood as disciplining a people in preparation to hear and respond to the gospel. It is at this point that the assumed western superiority enters. In reference to the Bantu, Walter Marx says that "they stand at the beginning of a development beyond which we in Europe have already moved." The Bantu, he continues, "first require an education by the law before they can grasp the

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[74] Hans-Werner Gensichen, "German Protestant Missions," in *Missionary Ideologies in the Imperialist Era, 1880–1920* (ed. Torben Christensen and William R. Hutchison; Århus, Denmark: Aros, 1982), 181–90, at 188.

[75] Hilko Wiardo Schomerus, "Die Mission und das Volkstum," in *Missionswissenschaft* (Leipzig: Verlag Quelle und Meyer, 1935), 136–49.

gospel," and we experience "daily with pain that our black Christians want to have the 'law'—and, indeed, need it."[76] To be disciplined by the law means to be civilised to a degree which then allows one to hear and respond to the gospel.[77] There are many examples of this basic racism even in an attempt to respect local culture.

Third, this natural theology set a range of conditions upon revealed theology. To regard primordial ties as necessary to fulness of life as the people of God in each place was to establish a necessary theological framework. Jesus Christ was not an eschatological figure that drew converts towards the kingdom of God. Rather, reference to the kingdom of God meant restoring the orders of creation. Per Hassing notes of Gutmann's position that "the Gospel does not move forward to its consummation in the kingdom of God, but moves back into primeval ties which seem to be static, unchangeable."[78] The idea of a natural theology, its form and function, gave shape to and determined revealed theology.

NATURAL THEOLOGY AND INTERCULTURAL VIOLENCE

This example from German missiology, one which develops links between a natural theology and indigenous expressions of the gospel, illustrates how the assumption of a universal disguises all too particular and value-laden accounts of culture and the proper social form of the gospel. Throughout its history, the "universals" of natural theology have changed, as is evidenced by the terminology used within the German example but foreign to theological discourse today: orders of creation, primal ties, blood and soil. The claim natural theology makes to universality disguises the cultural locations and value systems of those making such claims.[79] Even while affirming it as a project, David Fergusson acknowledges the "context-

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[76] Walter Marx, "Mission und dialektische Theologie: Mission und Volkstum," *NAMZ* 10, no. 7 (1933): 225–35, at 227–28.

[77] Willie James Jennings, "Can White People be Saved? Reflections on the Relationship of Missions and Whiteness," in *Can 'White' People be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission* (ed. Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramírez-Johnson, and Amos Yong; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 27–43.

[78] P. Hassing, "Bruno Gutmann of Kilimanjaro: Setting the Record Straight," *Missiology* 7 (1979): 423–33, at 432.

[79] Philip Gibbs, "Grass Roots in Paradise: Contextual Theology for Papua New Guinea," *MJT* 21 (2005): 37–62, at 39.

dependent setting of all natural theology."[80] Natural theology "has a socio-religious context that varies strikingly across cultures."[81] Wesley Wildman too concludes that natural theology avoids evaluation of its own "large-scale world-view," and "aims at direct inference from nature to ultimacy only by mistake—a mistake of oversimplification that takes the form of unanalysed and hidden presuppositions."[82] The traditional project of natural theology disregards its own cultural location, and so disregards the cultural frameworks, apologetic intent, and value systems that define what is "natural."

No such thing as nature exists beyond our interpretation and reading of it. The claim to speak of "nature" is itself contingent upon culture; culture gives us the language, the aesthetic, the interpretive frameworks to discover nature and to draw conclusions about its reality. Nature does not exist as a thing in itself; there is no unmediated access to nature. As Stephen Bevans suggests, "reality is mediated by meaning."[83] Layers of meaning help us make sense of and order our environments. This includes meaning attached to place, to history, to our ancestors, to land (and the possibility or not of owning land), and so includes entire economic systems, along with built space and so the ordering of space and indeed the ordering of time. Yet, because the authority of natural theology resides within this notion of an objective and supra-cultural reality, even while itself developing in service to a local and particular set of cultural questions, natural theology is cultural imperialism in another guise.

Because of this, though natural theology promises some form of continuity with the cultural and religious past, it denies the truth of that past—especially if a local culture fails to name a theistic and personal God.[84]

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[80] Fergusson, "Types of Natural Theology," 382.

[81] Fergusson, "Types of Natural Theology," 384.

[82] Wesley J. Wildman, "Comparative Natural Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (ed. Russell Re Manning; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 370–84, at 373and 381.

[83] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 4.

[84] As one example, see the 2010 Revised Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia. https://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/covenanting/item/668-the-revised-preamble. This preamble was developed as part of the covenanting relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), and reflects a commitment on behalf of the UCA to work for reconciliation with the First Peoples of Australia. §3 makes the following claim: "The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the

Despite its apparent interest in local cultural forms, natural theology exacerbates the problem of vacating our cultural histories. By disregarding its own cultural location, natural theology projects a local value system upon the world, and expects all peoples to confirm to that system. Because natural theology speaks to a universal knowledge, someone from outside the context can already 'know' where and how this God is to be found prior to any engagement with that context. Each particular context itself, in other words, has no particular meaning and adds nothing to the knowledge of God. Someone foreign to the context may well discover metaphors or analogies within a culture, but only with the intent of changing their meaning.

This cultural devaluation is consequent also on a particular kind of theological over-evaluation and associated ratification of the culture that names these universals. As Dalit theologian V. Devasahayam observes "in the name of universal experience, theologians were elevating particular historical experiences into the category of sacred and eternal experience."[85] Contingent cultural claims become merged with key theological positions. All too often Christian natural theology is an exercise in apologetics. In attempting to make the gospel intelligible, apologetic approaches begin with some a point of mediation beyond the gospel itself and in some "universal" position which might be agreed to by all parties.[86] The problem is, to cite Bruce McCormack, "the move from the general to the particular unavoidably

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arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways." This classic formulation of "God before the missionaries" Jione Havea, in a session with UCA candidates exploring the issue of racism during the Wednesday Formation Program, 15 May 2019, described as an instanced of "masked racism." It is so because it is foremost a claim of Christian theology, one made by the settler community and based on a particular commitment irrespective of any local knowledge. It is not a claim non-Christian First Peoples would make concerning their own law, custom, and spirituality. It is a claim that local Christian communities may make, but they would need to do this as a public proclamation and in discussion with alternative claims.

[85] V. Devasahayam, "Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions," in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (ed. V. Devasahayam; Madras: ISPCK, 1997), 270–82, at 272.

[86] "Christian theology began as an apologetic endeavor. It is inevitable in such efforts that common ground will be sought between the Christian apologete and his/her unbelieving audience. Metaphysics has been resorted to in the ancient and modern worlds because it moves from generally-valid first principles (which should be shared by all) to the particularities of Christian belief. McCormack, "Why Should Theology be Christocentric?" 64.

determines the *content* of the Christology which is then elaborated."[87] Whatever "special" revelation may bring to the context, it must conform to the account of the divine already represented in natural theology. Natural theology, because it lies outside explicit theological controls, produces normative accounts of the divine located within cultural affirmations. This then determines all subsequent theological claims—it establishes the "content" of Christology. With this theological edifice in place, particular experiences of the gospel cease to be local and become normative and universal and beyond other theological controls that may address the temptation to cultural accommodations.

The German experience illustrates well this interplay of an understanding of culture, how this culture expects a certain form for the embodiment of the faith, and the variety of theological assertions which follow. Culture was essentialised and this lent itself to an abstracted and static notion of true cultural form, which was fundamentally conservative and retrospective in horizon. This established borders to identity and developed into a value system and aesthetic used to evaluate people as belonging or not-belonging. From this followed a relative valuing of cultures, with some closer to the "gospel" and some further away. To describe the pre-Christian knowledge of God as "dim" and the encounter with Jesus as "fulfilment" suggests an evolutionary account of culture, one directed to an idea of civilisation. While it might allow for differences in surface culture, matters of style, or aesthetic, natural theology works against the possibility that local wisdom will inform our understanding of the gospel itself, that it will critically inform the wider Christian tradition.[88] Ambiguous merit attaches to the pre-Christian history because this is finally something we need to move beyond. If we understand God to be working through culture in an evolutionary or fulfilment mode, it ensures an ongoing hierarchy that privileges cultures that have "had" the gospel for "longer". With natural theology, the imperative always remains with the West, even as the intent is to affirm local cultural heritage.

Due to this hierarchy of culture, local communities will continue to receive instruction from the West concerning the embodied form of the

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[87] McCormack, "Why Should Theology be Christocentric?" 64.
[88] See, for example, the various complaints concerning Gal 3:28 and the way western Christians have used this verse to declare in advance that the church is already complete in terms of its capacity to encompass difference and so the fundamental denial of difference when encountering local cultures.

gospel, the type of theological questions which need to be asked, and the proper forms of theological expression. This is also a result of the continuing financial and political power of the churches in the West, even while the dominant number of Christians now reside in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania. Priority attaches to the theologies of the western tradition, even while local questions and answers are relativised by being named "contextual theologies."

Natural theology, as a project of Christian theology and informing this account of contextualisation, is a continuation of the problem of a universal tied to some notion of the historical continuity of the gospel through the invention of a stable and coherent western culture. It is rooted within a western value system, one which shapes the very notion of the universal and of the rational. Whatever its claim to deal with a universal experience, this twentieth century illustration demonstrates those universals to be culturally derivative and reflective of local histories, stories and accounts of the nature of unity. Natural theology itself does not sit external to these stories.

SEEKING A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF OUR PRE-CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

This exercise in problematising is not to question local and indigenous experiences of the presence of God. A significant and growing Christian commentary issuing from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania make consistent claims regarding their pre-Christian cultures and histories. The denial of local cultural histories leads to the replacement of these histories with one derived the West. Without a history we are as ships without mooring—being blown by the winds, adrift on the currents and tides, swamped by the waves. The resulting "anthropological poverty," to use Mveng's phrase, underlies a wider social, political, and economic exploitation. This problem, in other words, is no mere theological abstraction; it is a clear and urgent social concern.

However, while natural theology may seem to provide a theological avenue for addressing that problem, it is built upon that same approach to the universal which undergirded the colonial enterprise. Natural theology seems to offer a solution to the question of context by validating a dim knowledge of God in pre-Christian culture. This solution itself depends upon the idea of a universal knowledge of God that is transcultural—culture does not itself inform that knowledge. The local adds nothing of material importance to our understanding of the gospel. The opposite is the case—whatever dim

knowledge of the divine each pre-Christian culture may embody, though its culture and institutions require fulfilment. The local community is to embody the gospel in a way that lies beyond its own history. In other words, though natural theology appears interested in local culture, its understanding of culture and of history succeed only in affirming a hierarchy of cultures.

There is significant theological truth at stake: local cultures do not simply conform to a universal truth irrespective of any reference to the particular realities of each culture—each local community contributes something new to our understanding of Jesus Christ.

We might formulate the problem in another way: through the question of the local embodiment of the faith. Natural theology often seeks the "intelligibility" of religious belief. In terms of Christian theology, the faith has no intelligibility apart from the lived reality of the faith. There is no abstract or disembodied Christian theology because it has to do with the livingness of God and the people gathered by this God. The claims made by the gospel concerning the service of the least, the centrality of those in the margins, the weakest being able to see and hear the truth easier than the wealthy and powerful, the fundamental equality of all peoples, the destruction of all the "natural" boundaries in Christ, is precisely not "natural" knowledge. Natural knowledge is living and structuring our lives according to a range of divisions and in the assertion of power over-against one another. The challenge always before the church is that we retreat into these natural divisions and fail to live according to the openness and generosity of the gospel. Newbigin answers this question of intelligibility by referring to the congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel. The embodiment of the gospel, the people of God living according to non-natural grace, joy and peace of the gospel, points to the reality of God acting in history and so to the truth of that story. Contextualisation is a question of this local embodiment, and it begins as a question of continuity with our cultural past *in terms of our Christian faith*. We need a christological and pneumatological account of our pre-Christian heritage—one tied to our histories.