KARL BARTH AND THE LEGITIMACY OF NATURAL THEOLOGY
Rodney Holder

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Abstract: In this article I examine Karl Barth’s celebrated criticisms of natural theology. I describe how Barth broke onto the theological scene, bringing a necessary and revitalising corrective to nineteenth century liberalism. I examine the inter-war context in which Barth worked and his famous disputes with Harnack and Brunner. Central for Barth’s theology is the self-revelation of God in Christ as attested in Scripture. I argue, however, that Scripture itself contains a limited natural theology, and this formed part of the proclamation of the early church. Whilst remaining deeply impressed by Barth’s Christo-centrism, I argue that Barth’s approach leads ultimately to an irrationalism which deprives Christians of an important means of commending the faith in a pluralist society.

Introduction

Natural theology concerns the knowledge of God available to all human beings without recourse to special revelation. It is an area of intellectual enquiry with a long, if chequered history, dating back at least to the era of classical Greek thought. Within Christian theology the expression theología naturalis was coined by Augustine. Natural theology found classic expression in the works of St Anselm and, supremely, in the ‘Five Ways’ of St Thomas Aquinas.

The fortunes of natural theology fluctuated with the advent of the Enlightenment. At first it was elevated since the alternative way of knowing God, through revelation and therefore through external authority, was deemed suspect. But then it came to be attacked by Hume and, more thoroughly, Kant who rejected the idea that one could gain knowledge of realities beyond the phenomena of space and time.

The image of the watchmaker-designer of William Paley resonated with many, but this picture succumbed to the new discoveries of Charles Darwin. However, in recent years natural theology has undergone something of a renaissance, thanks especially I believe to the work of Richard Swinburne, who has restated the classical arguments in probabilistic terms. Discoveries in modern cosmology, especially of the fine-tuning of the universe, have also spurred natural theological reflection. I find myself deeply impressed by Swinburne’s work, and I also find the anthropic arguments coming from modern cosmology very striking and persuasive.

Arguments for the existence of God which arise out of modern cosmology comprise an important element of modern natural theology. They are also, I believe, of great value for apologetics. But there is a fundamental problem that needs to be faced. Is this approach to knowledge of God actually valid? Here I do not mean whether particular arguments are successful or not – this is clearly a matter for debate depending on particular formulations – but something much deeper and more basic. Is this an approach that Christians ought to pursue? Can it lead to genuine knowledge of God? Or is it just idolatry, substituting human endeavour for God’s only true revelation of himself in the Christ of Scripture?

Following St Thomas, Roman Catholic theology has always recognised the importance of natural theology. Thus the First Vatican Council condemns those who deny that God as Creator and Lord can be known by the ‘certain natural light of human reason’. However, there is a strong strand of Protestant theology that totally rejects this whole approach. The great pioneer of this rejection among Protestant theologians is Karl Barth, for whom natural theology is presumptuous and apologetics illegitimate.

In this paper I examine Barth’s theology and ask whether his rejection of natural theology is justified. As will become apparent I believe that Barth’s stance is too extreme. My own position is that there is a limited knowledge of God available to us in creation, but I believe this knowledge is God-given (it is God revealing himself), just as is our knowledge of God in Christ. To make this clear it might have been helpful, as is sometimes done, to replace the term ‘natural theology’ by ‘general revelation’, and to call God’s revelation of himself in Christ and Scripture ‘special revelation’. This might lead to a certain begging of the question. In any case the term ‘natural theology’ is widely used in the literature and unavoidable in quotations, so I retain it here.

The theology of Karl Barth

Karl Barth stands as a towering figure over twentieth century theology. Thomas Torrance argues that Barth was ‘the most powerfully biblical and evangelical theologian of our age’, and that he


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ranks with the very greatest theologians of all time – including Athanasius, Augustine, Luther and Calvin. It is therefore only with the greatest respect and trepidation that I venture to engage with what Barth says about natural theology.

Karl Barth’s starting point is his desire to deny all knowledge of God apart from God’s own gracious revelation of himself. God reveals himself in Christ and this revelation is made known to us in Scripture. It is by God’s grace alone (sola gratia) that we can know him: we cannot know him by our own efforts. This divine revelation is a miracle. In contrast, ‘Natural theology is the doctrine of a union of man with God existing outside God’s revelation in Jesus Christ’. Furthermore, ‘As the content of proclamation and theology it can have no place at all. It can be treated only as non-existent. In this sense, therefore, it must be excised without mercy’.

Barth contrasts ‘religion’, which he sees as concerning man’s own striving for God, with ‘theology’, which is man’s response to God’s self-revelation. He writes: ‘The event of God’s revelation has to be understood and expounded as it is attested to the Church of Jesus Christ by Holy Scripture.’ Barth’s shattering indictment is that in contrast to this ‘religion is unbelief’. Religion is man trying to do for himself what only God can do for him. It is man justifying himself rather than through faith accepting justification by the grace of God.

Barth would affirm that God has revealed himself both in history and in creation, but all argument should be from God to the world, not the other way round. Let us look at these aspects of God’s revelation in Barth’s thought, beginning with history.

First: Barth does not deny that events that are recorded objectively in Scripture happened. Supremeely, Barth affirms the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as an objective event. However, he denies the value of seeking historical evidence in support of this claim. Whilst the resurrection is indeed an objective event we must not seek ‘proof’ for its occurrence. It is to be accepted by faith.

Barth viewed the nineteenth century battles about the historical Jesus as futile and irrelevant. He also thought that reliance on history made the ordinary Christian beholden to the expert. It may be that he was reacting to the negative assessment of history in the Enlightenment, e.g. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing envisaged ‘an ugly broad ditch’ separating the contingent truths of history from the necessary truths of reason. Besides this, when historical research on the Bible was actually done its import was largely negative.

It might be that this Enlightenment analysis is wrong. It may be that certain historical events can have universal validity and it may be that the negative import of this historical research was a result of the methods employed. Generally, following the Enlightenment, historical Jesus research made no allowance for the supernatural. Ernst Troeltsch enunciated the principle of analogy, whereby past events are deemed by fiat to be similar to present events. Thus miraculous events in Biblical times were ruled out because there was no analogy with present events. Such methods are bound to lead to a non-supernatural Jesus because they start from premises that rule out the supernatural. But this need not be so, and more open-minded premises might well lead to other conclusions, as is evidenced by more recent trends in historical Jesus research. Moreover, it has been argued that evidence from testimony can in principle make it probable that a miraculous event occurred, and that Hume’s famous argument against miracles, whence much of the subsequent anti-miraculous prejudice came from, is fundamentally flawed.

In the case of the resurrection, we do of course have evidence in the form of eyewitness accounts. Barth would deny that these could even in principle provide ‘proof’ that the resurrection occurred because the accounts themselves come from faith, and therefore from a particular perspective. What he fails to realise is that this is true of any reporting of evidence. This fact does not mean that we cannot examine the evidence for its reliability, and make a judgement. Evidence of testimony will enhance the a priori probability that an event occurred. The problem with relying on faith alone is the danger that our beliefs become purely subjective – a result very far from Barth’s intention. One cannot escape the need for the exercise of reason, and if Christianity makes historical claims it seems only right to subject these to the tools of reason.

Barth’s position regarding natural theology is consistent with his views about the apologetic value of history. When he discusses the doctrine of creation he does so by expounding Genesis chapters 1 and 2. He makes no reference to scientific views about creation, for whilst he thought at first that this might be necessary, he later saw ‘that there can be no scientific problems, objections or aids in relation to what Holy Scripture and the Christian Church understand by the divine work of creation’. Science and the Christian doctrine are disjointed: they are about different things, but theology is primary: ‘There is free scope for natural science beyond what theology describes as the work of the Creator’.

For Barth, that God is Creator is just as much a matter of revelation as everything else in the Creed: ‘We are not nearer to believing in God the Creator, than we are to believing that Jesus Christ was conceived...’

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by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. This is because we understand the creation as his work and not vice versa, so we have to understand God as Creator first. Science might tell us about the development of the creation over millions of years, but continuation is ‘quite a different thing from this sheer beginning, with which the concept of creation and Creator has to do’. I would argue that the distinctions are not quite so sharp as this. The doctrine of creation embraces ‘continuation’ in that God sustains the universe and its laws in being. There seems to me to be a genuine overlap of concern here, since the Big Bang theory has something to say about the beginning, and revelation has something to say about God’s creating and sustaining activity. Moreover, some cosmological models deny that the world has a temporal origin (e.g. the Hawking-Hartle model removes the ‘specialness’ of the first moment, and some inflationary cosmologies posit no beginning in time), so talk of ‘sheer beginning’ may be something of a hostage to fortune. It is ontological origin which is important for Christian doctrine – why is there something rather than nothing? – rather than temporal origin.

Another area where scientific or philosophical arguments might impinge on theology concerns the reality of the world. Most scientists are realists, because their experience of doing science leads them in this direction, though realism has been questioned by some philosophers, most recently by those of a post-modern bent. Such scientific or philosophical arguments are not invoked by Barth. For him the key is the incarnation. We can be sure that the creation is real simply because God has become a creature. Because God has become man in Jesus Christ the existence of creation can no longer be doubted. It seems to me, however, that God’s faithfulness is seen in creation in other ways too. The operation of scientific laws, especially their regularity, is evidence for God’s faithfulness, and provides an argument for realism. Arguably it is easier to believe in the reality of the world than in the incarnation! For Barth the great mystery and miracle is the existence of the creation.

Whilst Barth seems to break radically with a strong line of common Christian tradition, he is in harmony with traditional Catholic and Protestant thinking when he goes on to assert that God does not need the world or us. He created heaven and earth and himself, but creation means something different: it means a reality distinct from God: ‘Creaturally reality means reality on the basis of a creatio ex nihilo, a creation out of nothing.’

Barth asserts that God transcends the limitations of our time and space – his time and space are different. However, that does not mean that ‘there is no time in him’. In this way Barth might avoid some of the problems associated with the traditional doctrine of God’s ‘timelessness’, though he wants to retain from that doctrine the idea that God has ‘presence’ which we do not. In any case, God must be temporal to be a living God, and more importantly to become incarnate in Christ: ‘Without God’s complete temporality the content of the Christian message has no shape.’

Barth agrees with Calvin that the object of creation is to be the theatre of God’s glory, i.e. of his manifestation or visibility. The goodness of the world consists in its being ‘the theatre of his glory, theatrum gloriae Dei’, as Calvin says of it.

Why, according to Barth, is there no natural knowledge of God? Nicholls notes that for Barth God is not unknowable on the grounds of Kant’s critique of pure reason. That is because we experience only phenomena, and so can only have reliable knowledge of phenomena, and cannot have knowledge of ‘things in themselves’. Rather, God is unknowable because of the ontological difference, the ‘infinite, qualitative distinction’ as Kierkegaard put it, between God the Creator and man the creature, and because sin has corrupted man’s nature. This goes further than Calvin’s view that man should know God through nature (and Calvin urged the study of nature through the natural sciences), but can do so imperfectly because of the Fall and sin. For Calvin revelation in Scripture both enhances the knowledge of God as Creator and is essential for saving knowledge of God as Redeemer.

To me, Calvin has it about right. Indeed Calvin’s view could be rephrased using the general/special revelation distinction that I noted at the end of my Introduction. A certain knowledge of God is available to all, whether members of the Christian community or not, through God’s general revelation in nature. Indeed God has implanted a religious sense in every human being whereby he can perceive God as Creator, and this religious sense gives rise to what would later be called ‘points of contact’ for the special revelation of God as Redeemer, in the Christ of Scripture. Barth denies the

14 Barth, Church Dogmatics, II.1, 620.
16 See John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, transl. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1989), I.ii.1 and I.v.1, where Calvin writes of the sensus divinitatis or sensum religiosum endowed by God, and of God’s manifest perfections in the whole structure of the universe, whereby ‘we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him’.

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1 Karl Barth, Dogmatics in Outline (London: SCM Press, 1949), 50.
existence of such points of contact (see below) and asserts that even this general revelation cannot be authenticated by human reason, apart from faith.

Avery Dulles notes some of the problems with Barth’s approach. How can there be revelation if men and women lack the capacity to receive it? And if the word can be received it must be distinguishable from its contradictory: ‘the simultaneous yes and no cannot be final.’ We return to some criticisms of Barth’s approach later.

The Barth-Brunner debate

Barth’s erstwhile friend and colleague, and fellow dialectical theologian, Emil Brunner, famously fell out following the publication of the latter’s Nature and Grace. Brunner was attempting to rehabilitate a natural theology and took as his basis the idea that man is created in the imago Dei. There is thus an analogy with the being of God – contra Barth, for whom there is no analogia entis which he perceives to be based on human insight, but only an analogia fidelis created on the basis of God’s self-revelation. Moreover, despite human sin there is, for Brunner, a ‘point of contact’ (Anknüpfungspunkt) in human nature for God to reveal himself, i.e. in man’s recognition of God in nature and history. There is something as it were, implanted in human nature, which God utilises in revealing himself. This might be awareness of God in nature, or an awareness of what sin is so that the gospel imperative ‘repent and be saved’ has meaning:

It will not do to kill the dialectic of this knowledge of sin by saying that knowledge of sin comes only by the grace of God. This statement is as true as the other, that the grace of God is comprehensible only to him who already knows about sin ... A man without conscience cannot be struck by the call ‘Repent ye and believe the Gospel.’

Barth’s peremptory reply was Nein! (the ultra-brief title of his article). He denied any such point of contact which might imply something a man contributes to his own salvation. The whole initiative of revelation is God’s: there is no ‘natural theology’. As Joan O’Donovan puts it,

Brunner argued for the indispensable role of the imago doctrine in articulating the universal being of sinful mankind apart from the redeeming and sanctifying grace of Christ, while Barth denied to the doctrine any non-Christological and pre-eschatological meaning.

In the context of the Germany of 1934 Barth was keen to deny Luther’s doctrine of divinely created ‘orders’ such as the family, the church and the state, particularly of course the last, which prevented creation’s collapse into chaos. Brunner’s position was however more subtle than would be one which lumped family, church and state together. Thus he distinguishes marriage as an ‘ordinance of creation’ from the state which is an ‘ordinance of preservation’, because the latter has to do with sin. Moreover, he was aware of the dangerous ‘false theology derived from nature’ which was ‘threatening the Church to the point of death’, and he acknowledged Barth’s passionate leadership in resisting such a theology.

Brunner argued that man’s being possesses a formal and a material aspect. The formal aspect is referred to at Genesis 1:26 and Psalm 8 and gives man superiority over the rest of creation because as a rational creature he is given a ‘capacity for words’ and ‘responsibility’. It is this formal structure which is analogous to divine being and indestructible by sin. In contrast the material image, including original righteousness and freewill, has been lost through sin. Brunner’s view resembles that of Irenaeus who split man’s nature in a manner not too dissimilar from this. Irenaeus thought man retained the image, i.e. rational nature and free will, at the Fall, but lost the likeness, i.e. moral virtue and righteousness. (As Luther and Calvin pointed out. Irenaeus failed to realise that Gen. 1:26 exhibits typical Hebrew parallelism.) O’Donovan notes such a definition of human nature leads to rejection of those not otherwise responsible or linguistically equipped (e.g. the unborn, the mentally handicapped), a point noted by Barth himself: ‘Are they not children of Adam? Has Christ not died for them?’

Brunner ascribes to man ‘partial’ knowledge of God’s will and human sin. In his nature/grace dialectic, echoing St Thomas Aquinas, grace is the completion, as well as the negation, of nature. In his response of repentance and faith the formal image receives new material content, original righteousness restored. Barth sees in Brunner’s anthropology man contributing to his own salvation, in defiance of the Reformation doctrine of sola gratia. He denies the pre-existing point of contact for divine grace. Rather this is renewed by Christ:

Man’s capacity for God, however it may be with his humanity and personality, has really been lost ... The image of God in man ... which constitutes the real point of contact for the Word of God, is the one awakened through Christ from real death to life and so restored, the newly-created rectitude now real as man’s possibility for the Word of God. This point of contact is, therefore, not real outside faith but only in faith.

17 In the context of the Germany of 1934 Barth was keen to deny Luther’s doctrine of divinely created ‘orders’ such as the family, the church and the state, particularly of course the last, which prevented creation’s collapse into chaos. Brunner’s position was however more subtle than would be one which lumped family, church and state together. Thus he distinguishes marriage as an ‘ordinance of creation’ from the state which is an ‘ordinance of preservation’, because the latter has to do with sin. Moreover, he was aware of the dangerous ‘false theology derived from nature’ which was ‘threatening the Church to the point of death’, and he acknowledged Barth’s passionate leadership in resisting such a theology.
20 ‘That is the “point of contact”: capacity for words and responsibility.’
22 Barth, ‘No’, in Natural Theology, 89.
23 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1.1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 273.
existence of such points of contact (see below) and asserts that even
general revelation cannot be authenticated by human reason.
apart from faith.

Avery Dulles notes some of the problems with Barth’s approach.
How can there be revelation if men and women lack the capacity
to receive it? And if the word can be received it must be distinguishable
from its contradictory: ‘the simultaneous yes and no cannot be
final.’ We return to some criticisms of Barth’s approach later.

The Barth-Brunner debate

Barth’s erstwhile friend and colleague, and fellow dialectical
theologian, Emil Brunner, famously fell out following the publication
of the latter’s Nature and Grace. Brunner was attempting to
rehabilitate a natural theology and took as his basis the idea that
man is created in the imago Dei. There is thus an analogy with the
being of God – contra Barth, for whom there is no analogia entis
which he perceives to be based on human insight, but only an
analogia fidelis created on the basis of God’s self-revelation. Moreover,
despite human sin there is, for Brunner, a ‘point of contact’
(Anknüpfungspunkt) in human nature for God to reveal himself,
t. i.e. in man’s recognition of God in nature and history. There is
something as it were, implanted in human nature, which God
utilises in revealing himself. This might be awareness of God in
nature, or an awareness of what sin is so that the gospel imperative
’repent and be saved’ has meaning:

It will not do to kill the dialectic of this knowledge of sin by
saying that knowledge of sin comes only by the grace of God.
This statement is as true as the other, that the grace of God
is comprehensible only to him who already knows about sin ...
A man without conscience cannot be struck by the call ‘Repent
ye and believe the Gospel.’

Barth’s peremptory reply was Nein! (the ultra-brief title of his
article). He denied any such point of contact which might imply
something a man contributes to his own salvation. The whole
initiative of revelation is God’s: there is no ‘natural theology’.

As Joan O’Donovan puts it,

Brunner argued for the indispensable role of the imago doctrine
in articulating the universal being of sinful mankind apart
from the redeeming and sanctifying grace of Christ, while
Barth denied to the doctrine any non-Christological and
pre-eschatological meaning.


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14 Avery Dulles, Models of Revelation (2nd edn, New York: Orbis Books,
Maryknoll, 1992), 97.
Fraenkel, with an introduction by John Balfe (London: Geoffrey Bles,
The Centenary Press, 1946). 31: Barth’s response is included in the same
volume.
18 Joan E. O’Donovan, ‘Man in the Image of God’, Scottish Journal of
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Again, he writes: ‘The Holy Ghost, who proceeds from the Father and the Son and is therefore revealed and believed to be God, does not stand in need of any point of contact but that which he himself creates.’

Roman Catholic theologians also appealed to St Thomas’ dictum, ‘Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it,’ in order to justify a concordat between the Vatican and the Nazi regime. As with Brunner, this seemed to validate the claims of the German Christians who saw grace as not destroying German nature but perfecting it, and hence as seeing their own national folk-consciousness as a revelation of God.

### Historical background to Barth’s thought

The dialectical theology of Barth and others has much to commend it. It came like a breath of fresh air as a necessary corrective to nineteenth century liberalism which had been, as Barth claimed, man-centred in its approach to theology. In analysing Barth’s theology it helps greatly to see the context in which he worked. We have already seen something of this, but it will be helpful to delve a little more into the historical background.

When Barth arrived as pastor of Safenwil in the Swiss Alps and found himself having to preach every week, he soon realised that his Reformed congregation expected to hear the Word of God spoken to them by the preacher. His university training had simply not equipped him for this task. He felt that it was essential to go back to the Bible and expound it, for it was there that God had revealed himself in Christ. A further indictment of liberalism came when Barth found that almost all his former university teachers, whom he had hitherto greatly venerated, were among ninety-three German intellectuals who made a proclamation in support of the Kaiser’s war aims in World War I. For Barth, theology must issue in a distinct ethics, and from this moment he knew he could no longer follow his teachers’ ethics, dogmatics, or their understanding of the Bible and history.

Barth’s dialectical theology dropped on the world of the theological establishment like a bombshell with the publication of his *Römerbrief* (Commentary on Romans) in 1921, written whilst Barth was still a pastor at Safenwil. It shortly gave rise to a heated debate with his former teacher: the great Church historian and grand old man of German theology, Adolf von Harnack. In 1923 Harnack published an article entitled ‘Fifteen Questions to the Despisers of Scientific Theology among the Theologians’ in the journal *Christian World*. (Incidentally the title echoes that of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s classic *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher being the pioneer of nineteenth century liberal theology with whom Barth is chiefly at odds.) In his article Harnack wrote this:

> If it is certain that everything that is subconscious, non-rational, numinous, fascinating and so on remains subhuman as long as it is not apprehended, understood and purified by reason, how is it possible to wish to belittle, even reject, this reason? Is there really any other theology than that which has a firm connection and blood relationship to science in general?

Barth’s reply contained this passage:

> If theology regained the courage to be objective, the courage to become a witness of the word of revelation, of judgement, and of the love of God, then it could also be that ‘science in general’ would have to look out for its ‘firm connection and blood relationship’ to theology, rather than the other way round.

This correspondence also exposes a marked divergence on the issue of history. Harnack asks how, if Jesus Christ be central to the gospel, one can ignore the findings of critical-historical study in order to find a ‘reliable and generally accepted knowledge of that person’. Barth’s perfunctory reply is that such a ‘reliable and generally accepted knowledge ... can only be that of faith awakened by God’.

We have seen how the rise of Nazism in the inter-war period provided a further, vital context for Barth’s rejection of natural theology. The Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church, made at the Synod of Barmen on 31 May 1934, was drawn up by Barth. The story goes, while the other delegates were enjoying an afternoon nap! It is instructive to see the text of the first article of the theological declaration and Barth’s interpretation of it:

> I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me (Jn 14:6).  

> Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber ... I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved (Jn 10:1. 9).

> Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

> We condemn the false doctrine that the Church can and must recognise as God’s revelation other events and powers, forms and truths, apart from and alongside this one Word of God.

In expounding the Barmen Declaration Barth is adamant that in Adolf Hitler ‘a source of specific new revelation of God ... demanding obedience and trust, took its place beside the revelation attested in

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What is perhaps surprising is that Barth should equate this Nazi usurpation of God's revelation with developments in preceding centuries:

> There can be no doubt that not merely a part but the whole had been intended and claimed when it had been demanded that side by side with its attestation in Jesus Christ and therefore in Holy Scripture the Church should also recognise and proclaim God's revelation in reason, in conscience, in the emotions, in history, in nature, and in culture and its achievements and developments.

The 'also' in these former demands also really meant to be an 'only'. Barth writes, '... even if we only lend our little finger to natural theology, there necessarily follows the denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ'. If these earlier proclamations of the knowability of God in Christ alongside other proclamations of his knowability in nature, reason and history, had been legitimate, then the same could be true of linking the proclamation of knowing God in Christ with racial purity.

An important question to raise concerning Barth's thinking is: 'Did it change?' Did the radical challenge to the possibility of knowledge of God in nature moderate when the crisis of the Nazi era was over? It seems to me that the answer to this question is, in all essentials, 'No!' Nevertheless this is not quite the angry 'No!' of the Brunner correspondence. Perhaps the key text is Barth's 1956 lecture 'The Humanity of God' (German Die Menschlichkeit Gottes). Here he is more generous to his opponents: We are called upon today to accord that earlier theology ... greater historical justice than appeared to us possible and feasible in the violence of the first break-off and clash.' Nevertheless it was clear that that theology 'could no longer continue as it was' and although the challenge was made 'somewhat brutally and severely', that challenge was indeed essential.

Whilst there is therefore no going back, Barth does acknowledge the need for a moving forward, indeed for a 'revision' (Retraktion). He further acknowledges that although the challenge to liberalism was right, 'we were only partially in the right'. The fundamental need in this revision is not now to see the Deity of God, which was obscured by the liberal theology, but 'the humanity of God'. The 'infinite qualitative distinction' can lead to a deity of God more resembling that of the God of the philosophers than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The counterbalance is that the deity of the living God must find its meaning in relationship to man. So the infinite qualitative distinction is bridged in Christ, who 'comes forward to man on behalf of God calling for and awakening faith, love and hope, and to God on behalf of man, representing man, making satisfaction and interceding'.

What this new emphasis on the 'humanity of God', seen Christologically, means however, is that there is still no natural theology. We do not need to engage in a free-ranging investigation to seek out and construct who and what God truly is, and who and what man truly is, but only to read the truth about both where it resides, namely, in the fullness of their togetherness, their covenant which proclaims itself in Jesus Christ. The initiative is all God's and the sequence of God's act inducing man's response irreversible: 'Thus we have here no universal deity capable of being reached conceptually, but this concrete deity - real and recognisable in the descent grounded in that sequence and peculiar to the existence of Jesus Christ.'

Analysis

I have to agree with Barth that God's self-revelation in Christ as attested in Holy Scripture is primary. The absolute centrality of the person of Jesus Christ to Karl Barth is deeply impressive. In the crisis of the church struggle in Germany in the Nazi period, perhaps only a theology so utterly and unequivocally Christ-centred could have been effective. Having said this, I must disagree with Barth that there is simply no such thing as natural theology. As creator, God has left evidence of himself in the natural world. Scripture itself testifies as much.

We read in Acts 14:17 that God 'did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rain and fruitful seasons ...' In Romans 1:19 Paul asserts that 'What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.' The Old Testament too appeals to the natural world as revealing God's glory (e.g. Psalm 19:1 - 'The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handiwork'). In the Apocrypha, Wisdom 13:1-9 (which may well have influenced Paul in Rom. 1) presents an argument from creation to knowledge of the Creator, appealing to the findings of Greek science: 'For from the 50

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It would seem that there is an inherent contradiction in Barth’s position here. God’s self-revelation in Scripture is all that matters, yet Scripture itself asserts that there is a knowledge of God to be obtained from the observation of nature. This might extend to what we can learn about God’s will by observation of the animal kingdom, e.g. ‘Go to the ant, thou sluggard’ (Prov. 6:6). There is much appeal to nature in the wisdom literature of the OT.

Of course ‘natural’ knowledge of God (i.e. knowledge of God through his general revelation of himself in nature) is not adequate for salvation. In Acts 17 Paul at first commends his hearers. He even identifies the ‘unknown god’ that they worship with the God whom he, Paul, proclaims. Evidently the ‘God of the philosophers’ is ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’. Astonishingly, he quotes Greek poets, Epimenides of Crete and Aratus of Cilicia, in support. Paul seems to be building on what thinking Greeks knew about God from their philosophical reflection, contemplation and experience. This all strongly suggests an Anknüpfungspunkt, a point of contact, for the gospel. Of course Paul goes on to call his Greek listeners to repentance because God has ‘winked at’ former sins and idolatry stemming from an inadequate grasp of the nature of God. In Romans 1:18ff. also, we read that human beings are without excuse because they could know God from creation, but in practice turned to idols and perversion. There is natural knowledge of God, but God’s revelation in Christ is essential for salvation.

It is also true that natural knowledge of God does not get one to the Trinity. Some would argue that it is therefore not getting you to the same God as is revealed to us in Holy Scripture. Notwithstanding Acts 17, the ‘God of the philosophers’ is not to be identified with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who goes on to reveal himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, since there can be only one Creator and indeed the unity of the cosmos points to a single Creator, we must be speaking about the same God that is revealed in Scripture. What we learn from nature may be an incomplete and inadequate picture of God. Nevertheless, natural theology leads one not only to a Creator in the first place, but to a Creator with certain attributes, e.g. majesty and power, which are associated with the Biblical God. Arguably the universality of the laws of nature, i.e. their applicability across all of space and time, would lead one to conclude that there is only one God. This view needs to be supplemented and enriched by our Biblical knowledge of God, e.g. God is personal and is related to the world as the Triune God, and is not just some distant ‘prime mover’ – but the view of natural theology is not wrong in itself.

Torrance puts Barth’s position thus: ‘... we are unable to achieve through our own natural powers and capacities the cognitive union with God which true knowledge of him requires’. But this is grossly to overstate the claims of natural theology. We are only claiming that the existence of the universe, and the order within it, enhance the a priori probability that it was made and designed by some transcendent agency. In the steps of Richard Swinburne one can equate this agency to God, on grounds of simplicity, with a suitable definition of God in terms of a being possessing the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience etc.

Of course this knowledge does not of itself give one a relationship with God.

We have seen also that in Scripture there is an appeal to evidence of a historical kind, which contradicts Barth’s claim that such evidence is not to be sought. Especially important in this regard would be Paul’s listing of eyewitnesses to the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. The gospel accounts also give eyewitness reports of the resurrection, and rebut alternative explanations for the empty tomb - especially that the disciples removed the body.

I see natural knowledge of God, far from being a substitute for, as preparatory to the saving knowledge of Christ, and providing at least one ‘point of contact’ for Christ to reveal himself (so, although not necessarily going along with Bruner’s anthroplogy, I side with him on this point). In my earlier phraseology general revelation precedes and prepares for special revelation. The vast gulf between man and God because of human sin, emphasised by Barth, is also real. The revelation of Christ is necessary for salvation and must be received in faith. This revelation occurs when God is pleased to reveal himself in Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer accused Barth of introducing a positivist doctrine of revelation ‘which says, in effect, “Like it or lump it!”: virgin birth, Trinity, or anything else; each is an equally significant and necessary part of the whole, which must simply be swallowed as a whole or not at all. That isn’t biblical’.

David Jenkins says that Barth ‘so isolates theology as not so much to make it incredible as to make it impossible for us to know whether it is incredible or not.’ He goes on:

But it is by no means clear that there is the total discontinuity between belief and unbelief which Barth posits. If there is, then we can only wait for the miracle. But as we shall not believe in the possibility of such a miracle unless it has happened to us we shall not even wait. This seems an oddly hopeless position to be in in a world where God is both supposed to have created and to have been incarnate in.

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31 Swinburne, The Existence of God. 8.
greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator ... for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things? Arguably the findings of science, especially of the vastness of the universe, enhance rather than detract from our perception of the glory of God.

It would seem that there is an inherent contradiction in Barth's position here. God's self-revelation in Scripture is all that matters, yet Scripture itself asserts that there is a knowledge of God to be obtained from the observation of nature. This might extend to what we can learn about God's will by observation of the animal kingdom, e.g. 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard' (Prov. 6:6). There is much appeal to nature in the wisdom literature of the OT.

Of course 'natural' knowledge of God (i.e. knowledge of God through his general revelation of himself in nature) is not adequate for salvation. In Acts 17 Paul at first commends his hearers. He even identifies the 'unknown god' that they worship with the God whom he, Paul, proclaims. Evidently the 'God of the philosophers' is 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'. Astonishingly, he quotes Greek poets, Epimenides of Crete and Aratus of Cilicia, in support. Paul seems to be building on what thinking Greeks knew about God from their philosophical reflection, contemplation and experience. This all strongly suggests an *Anknüpfungspunkt*, a point of contact, for the gospel. Of course Paul goes on to call his Greek listeners to repentance because God has 'winked at' former sins and idolatry stemming from an inadequate grasp of the nature of God. In Romans 1:19ff. also, we read that human beings are without excuse because they could know God from creation, but in practice turned to idols and perversion. There is natural knowledge of God, but God's revelation in Christ is essential for salvation.

It is also true that natural knowledge of God does not get one to the Trinity. Some would argue that it is therefore not getting you to the same God as is revealed to us in Holy Scripture. Notwithstanding Acts 17, the 'God of the philosophers' is not to be identified with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who goes on to reveal himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, since there can be only one Creator and indeed the unity of the cosmos point to a single Creator, we must be speaking about the same God that is revealed in Scripture. What we learn from nature may be an incomplete and inadequate picture of God. Nevertheless, natural theology leads one not only to a Creator in the first place, but to a Creator with certain attributes, e.g. majesty and power, which are associated with the Biblical God. Arguably the universality of the laws of nature, i.e. their applicability across all of space and time, would lead one to conclude that there is only one God. This view needs to be supplemented and enriched by our Biblical knowledge of God, e.g. God is personal and is related to the world as the Triune God, and is not just some distant 'prime mover' – but the view of natural theology is not wrong in itself.

Torrance puts Barth's position thus: '... we are unable to achieve through our own natural powers and capacities the cognitive union with God which true knowledge of him requires'. But this is grossly to overstate the claims of natural theology. We are only claiming that the existence of the universe, and the order within it, enhance the *a priori* probability that it was made and designed by some transcendent agency. In the steps of Richard Swinburne one can equate this agency to God, on grounds of simplicity, with a suitable definition of God in terms of a being possessing the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience etc.31 Of course this knowledge does not of itself give one a relationship with God.

We have seen also that in Scripture there is an appeal to evidence of a historical kind, which contradicts Barth's claim that such evidence is not to be sought. Especially important in this regard would be Paul's listing of eyewitnesses to the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. The gospel accounts also give eyewitness reports of the resurrection, and rebut alternative explanations for the empty tomb – especially that the disciples removed the body.

I see natural knowledge of God, far from being a substitute for, as preparatory to the saving knowledge of Christ, and providing at least one 'point of contact' for Christ to reveal himself (so, although not necessarily going along with Brunner's anthropology, I side with him on this point). In my earlier phraseology general revelation precedes and prepares for special revelation. The vast gulf between man and God because of human sin, emphasised by Barth, is also real. The revelation of Christ is necessary for salvation and must be received in faith. This revelation occurs when God is pleased to reveal himself in Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer accused Barth of introducing a positivist doctrine of revelation 'which says, in effect, “Like it or lump it!”: virgin birth, Trinity, or anything else; each is an equally significant and necessary part of the whole, which must simply be swallowed as a whole or not at all. That isn't biblical'.32

David Jenkins says that Barth 'so isolates theology as not so much to make it incredible as to make it impossible for us to know whether it is incredible or not.' He goes on:

_But it is by no means clear that there is the total discontinuity between belief and unbelief which Barth posits. If there is, then we can only wait for the miracle. But as we shall not believe in the possibility of such a miracle unless it has happened to us we shall not even wait. This seems an oddly hopeless position to be in in a world which God is both supposed to have created and to have been incarnate in._33

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31 Swinburne, _The Existence of God_. 8.
John Bowden makes a similar point in the context of sharing the faith:

To take the most minor practical point: if knowledge of God is as Barth describes it, how can the Christian talk to his friend and persuade him to share his beliefs and concerns? He cannot point to any hints of God in experience, history, morality, for these are all ruled out of court. All that seems possible is to sit in silence and wait: and if nothing happens, atheism is a perfectly logical conclusion, on Barth’s own premises. 84

Roger Trigg is critical of Barth because he seems to be irrational, along the lines of the above quotations. Barth says that we must rely only on revelation, and not on human reason, yet of course his own arguments are a product of human reasoning. 85 The question is, Why should we believe that which is purportedly God’s revelation to us? There are, after all, false prophets, and we need to ‘test the spirits’. How do we know revelation is from God? The only way is surely by appeal to reason. Yet this is precisely the path which Barth denies to us.

In order to evaluate whether something is a revelation of God, we shall need the tools of reason. We shall need to have some prior concept of God in order to recognise the revelation. One source of such a prior concept is surely natural theology. Unless the critical tools of reason are brought to bear our belief is arbitrary, and impossible to commend to others. We end up in the sea of post-modern relativism, in which my beliefs and your beliefs, though incommensurate, are equally tenable because we are not prepared to put them to the tests of rational justification.

Barth sees his theology as scientific and rational, not in Harnack’s sense, but in the sense that it attunes its methods to its object. One important move he makes is away from revelation as propositional truths about God to God himself as truth. There are indeed dangers in thinking we can confine God too tightly in propositions made in human words (can these ever be adequate?). Yet Barth’s theology itself is inevitably full of propositions. Torrance notes that for Barth, in orthodoxy ‘objective descriptions of the truth were confounded with or mistaken for the truth itself, so that they were not subject to its critical questioning or judgement’. 86 But again, the question is, ‘How can we know how God judges?’

My view is different from Barth’s. I believe we can recognise the existence of the Creator from the creation. I agree with Barth that we need revelation to inform us of the other articles of the creed: the doctrines of the Trinity and of the person of Christ cannot be derived from pure reason, though even here I would argue that such beliefs are, or ought to be, rational. We believe them on good grounds, though now those grounds include the Biblical revelation. Claims about the person of Christ are supported by the evidence of his life, death and resurrection. Of course faith is essential, and, moreover, faith is not simply a matter of believing the facts about Christ as stated for us in the creeds (which is more or less what St Thomas Aquinas thought). Faith involves a response: as Luther said, it is putting one’s trust in the living God. At the end of the day, though, the faith of Christians is not blind, irrational faith, but faith in a God of order and reason.

There seems to be a problem here for evangelism and apologetics: we are bidden by Scripture to ‘be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you’ (1 Pet. 3:15), and to preach the gospel to all nations, but is conversion solely God’s work of self-revelation? In one sense the answer to this is of course ‘yes’, but at the same time God does use human beings as his instruments. It seems to me that arguments put forward using reason may at least prepare the ground for God’s self-revelation in Christ – indeed that God can and does work through such arguments – though of course God is free to reveal himself wherever, whenever and to whomsoever.

I agree with Barth, however, that for Christians Christ must remain central. Natural theology will always be of secondary importance. We must also be aware of the dangers of natural theology. For us, the main danger is not National Socialism but the more subtle and insidious danger posed by religious pluralism. Natural theology gives us a point of contact with some of the world’s major religions, as it did for Paul in Athens. But we must insist that it is only a starting point and that ‘Jesus Christ is goal of everything, and the centre to which everything tends. He who knows him knows the meaning of all things.’ (Pascal.)

85 Trigg, Rationality and Religion, 177.
86 Torrance, Karl Barth, 226.
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35 Trigg, Rationality and Religion, 177.
36 Torrance, Karl Barth, 226.