

The Religious Roots of Natural Theology

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Two Sources of Natural Theology

The last few decades have seen a revival of interest among Anglo-American philosophers in natural theology, especially in what is an important part (though not the whole) of it, philosophical arguments for God's existence. Of course, such arguments have been discussed for centuries, but the present situation contrasts strikingly with much of the twentieth century, when it was assumed by most analytic philosophers that they had been refuted definitively by Hume, Kant, and some later philosophers. There was, too, at that time opposition to the whole enterprise of natural theology in certain theological quarters, most notably, as we shall see, in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*.

No doubt discussions will move to and fro in future centuries, as they have done in past ones. My purpose now, however, is not to follow particular arguments and their counter-positions, but to suggest that there at least two good religious reasons (apart from Biblical texts like Rom. 1:19-20 and Acts 14:17) why natural theology is likely to flourish perennially: (1) behind particular arguments there are certain natural human reactions, especially wonder — not just at the beauty or intricacy of the world, but also at its very existence, at the fact that there is something rather than nothing; (2) theistic arguments are inverse forms of fundamental religious doctrines, e.g. Cosmological arguments reverse the doctrine of Creation, in that the latter claims that God brought the world into being and sustains it in being, whilst the arguments seek to infer His existence from that of the world or from some very general feature of it.

I shall say little about the first of these reasons for the continued popularity of natural theology, since it has already been noted and well discussed by others. J.J.C. Smart, for example, in one of his early articles, discussed two of the most common kinds of theistic argument, the Cosmological and the Teleological, and concluded that,

although the arguments themselves are invalid, they are nevertheless important because behind them lies the fundamental religious attitude, which he describes in terms of awe that anything should exist at all and wonder at the grandeur and majesty of the universe.¹

More recent philosophers, especially some of those influenced by the later works of Wittgenstein, point to the fundamental role in religion of certain fundamental responses, e.g. wonder at the world or gratitude for one's existence. In his 'Lecture on Ethics' Wittgenstein himself, perhaps developing his own earlier statement that 'Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is' (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.44), spoke of his wondering at the existence of the world, and seeing it as a miracle. Paradoxically, whilst dismissing such wondering as nonsensical (for we can only sensibly wonder, he says, at the existence of particular things), he nevertheless sees such a tendency to 'run against the boundaries of language' and 'go beyond the world' as one that is found in all those who have ever tried to write or talk ethics or religion (shades of Karl Rahner!), including Wittgenstein himself, and one deserving respect.² Among his followers, Professor D.Z. Phillips has related religious activities like worship and praise of God to the basic human reactions that I have noted.³

All this is familiar territory. Let me move on therefore to the second reason for the perennial religious attraction of natural theology, its close relation to some fundamental religious doctrines. Here we need to start from the basic distinction between the order of being and the order of knowledge. In the order of being God precedes the world, for without Him there could not be anything. But in the order of knowledge we proceed in the opposite direction, from something we already know, like the world or (for Descartes) one's own self, and proceed from there to God. Thus in the order of being God → world, but in the order of knowledge world → God (where the arrow indicates in the first case a process of bringing into being, and in the second a movement of coming to know). Religious doctrines like those of Creation and Providence are concerned primarily with the order of being, with explaining God's relation to the world, whilst theistic arguments, I maintain, go in the opposite direction, from world to God.

The fact that such arguments are inverse forms of religious doctrines is most obvious in the case of the first example that I have mentioned, that of Creation. As I have said, this doctrine states that God brought the world into being, and that He sustains it in being, whilst cosmological arguments proceed in the opposite direction,

from the very fact of its existence, or from some very general feature of it like change, causation, or contingency. Similarly, the doctrine of General Providence states that God is present in the world He created, ordering it and guiding it to its final purpose (*telos*), while Teleological arguments start from what Francis Bacon called 'the footsteps of the Creator', i.e. apparent order, purposiveness, and so on, in the world, and move from there to the existence of a source of these qualities. Some versions of such arguments are also closely related to the claim that perfections in the world, e.g. beauty or wisdom, reflect the qualities of their Creator.

The two kinds of argument that I have mentioned so far are the most common kinds of theistic argument and the ones which best illustrate my thesis. But I think that the analysis can also be applied to other kinds of argument. The type of argument exemplified in St Anselm's *Proslogion* ii-iii and Descartes' fifth *Meditation*, later christened the Ontological Argument, seeks to move from the idea of God in our minds to His existence in reality. Such arguments are obviously related to the claim that God has implanted the idea of Himself in our minds, a claim emphasized by St Augustine (an important influence on Anselm), and later made by Calvin, who taught that all people have been given some idea of God.

In the nineteenth century arguments from conscience or our moral sense were popular. These, again, can be related to certain religious claims, e.g. that conscience is the voice of God or that in creating us God implanted in us some knowledge of the moral law or made it possible for us to go some way by our natural reason to deduce it. Such arguments became less popular in the twentieth century, probably because of the growth of moral relativism then.

Instead, interest in religious experience came to take a central place in twentieth-century thinking about religion. At first sight, it might seem that this is far removed from theistic arguments: you either have such experiences and regard them as giving you direct knowledge of God or of some other spiritual process or entity, or you don't; and in the latter case why should one accept someone else's testimony? But some thinkers have regarded them as the basis of an argument, and text-books in the philosophy of religion often refer to 'the argument from religious experience' (the phrase 'religious experience' is a relatively modern one, not current before the nineteenth century, and popularized by William James' Gifford Lectures of 1901-02, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*). In the famous debate on the existence of God on the Third Programme in 1948 Fr F.C.Copleston argued against Bertrand Russell that whilst

religious experience is not a strict proof of the existence of God, the best explanation of it is His existence. By religious experience he meant 'a loving, but unclear, awareness of some object which irresistibly seems to the experiencer as something transcending the self, something transcending all normal objects of experience, something which cannot be pictured or conceptualized, but of the reality of which doubt is impossible.'⁴ Such an experience cannot be adequately explained subjectively, Copleston claimed, but most easily on the hypothesis that there is some objective cause of it.

So here again we can see, more tenuously, that natural theology is an inverse form of religious doctrine: the religious believer thinks that God at times makes Himself known in an especially close way to people, whilst an argument of natural theology like Copleston's starts from the experiences and infers God's existence as the best explanation of them.

Is Natural Theology Foundational to Religious Belief?

All that I have tried to show so far is that natural theology answers certain basic urges in human beings, and that its arguments are closely related to some religious doctrines, so that it has a perennial appeal. I have not defended any particular argument; nor have I asserted the *necessity* of natural theology, e.g. as a foundation of belief in God, or as a presupposition of faith. A Calvinist might argue that even though we are indeed related to God in the order of being in our createdness and so forth, our intellect is so fallen that we cannot safely work in the opposite direction and infer His existence from creation. The conclusions of the arguments of natural theology may of course be true in so far as they are versions of Christian doctrines, but we are in no position now to infer them through our reason from our ordinary experience of the world. Moreover, there is always the danger, as Barth argued, that by starting from such experience, rather than from the gracious revelation through Jesus Christ, we produce a concept of God that is the projection of the highest we know, a construct of human thinking, divorced from salvation history.⁵

The issue of whether religious belief presupposes a natural theology also raises questions about the nature and role of philosophy of religion today. At the moment the latter is a popular area of study not just in university courses but in A Level courses in many schools; and the assessment of theistic arguments plays a prominent role in it. But all too often people tend to assume that religious belief depends on some philosophical proof of God's

existence, and that the lack of any generally acknowledged proof ('You just prove to me that God exists!') means that religious belief has no certain foundations. So the popularity of the subject today is perhaps a mixed blessing.

As an example of someone who thinks that natural theology is essential for theism, we might take Sir Anthony Kenny. In his *Faith and Reason*, for example, he argues that belief in the existence of God, to be justifiable and defensible, requires argument by natural theology; and that faith is a vice rather than a virtue unless the existence of God can be rationally justified outside faith. Since Kenny finds neither arguments for the existence of God nor arguments against it convincing, he concludes that he is truly agnostic on the matter (unlike those who say that we *cannot* decide the question, or who, like Antony Flew, claim that there is a 'presumption of atheism').⁶

Kenny's view is in sharp contrast with Barth's. But it also contrasts with the attitude of some Catholic thinkers who are relatively unsympathetic to natural theology, e.g. Pascal and Newman; and also with that of some non-Christian thinkers. A thirteenth-century Sufi sage, Ibn 'Ata' Illah, for instance, said 'My God... When did You become so absent that You need a proof giving evidence of You? And when did you become so distant that it is created things themselves that lead us to You?'' More pithily, Fred Crosson wrote (with reference to Pascal), '...an inferred God is an absent God.'⁸

At first sight Kenny's position seems to be very similar to that of St Thomas Aquinas. But it should be noted that they differ in certain respects. Aquinas says indeed, just before introducing his Five Ways, that the existence of God is knowable by natural reason, so it is not an article of faith but a preamble, for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature. Nevertheless, he says, someone who cannot grasp its proof may accept as a matter of faith something that is in itself capable of being known and demonstrated (*Summa Theologiae* Ia.ii.2 ad 1). Slightly earlier on, in the very first question of the *Summa*, in which he discusses the nature of '*sacra doctrina*', he says that even as regards those truths about God that human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation, because otherwise the truth about God could be known only by a few, after a long time, and with the admixture of error (Ia.i.1). More generally, Aquinas says that natural reason ministers to faith, and uses the authority of philosophers — but only as extrinsic and probable, whereas the

authority of Scripture is incontrovertible proof (la.i.8 ad 2). Of course, as Kenny realises, all this raises the modern question of how the most fundamental preamble of the faith, the existence of God, can be known by someone who does not acknowledge the authority of Scripture, and who understands natural theology but is not convinced by arguments for God's existence).

Kenny's position also differs from that of the First Vatican Council. That Council did indeed define in 1870 that 'God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known for certain by the natural light of human reason from created things.'⁹ It did not, however, specify that this knowledge must be acquired through philosophical argument, nor did it say that it must be the foundation of religious belief or theology. The Council's position would cover the Psalmist who exclaimed (without, I think, making an inference) that 'The Heavens declare the glory of the Lord' (Ps. 19:1) as much as the philosophical theologian. It goes on immediately to quote the first part of Rom. 1:20, 'For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made', and later to say, like Aquinas, that it pleased God to also reveal Himself and His decrees by another, supernatural way. As with so many of this and other Councils' positions, we should ask whom it is condemning. The answer seems to be that it was attacking some nineteenth-century thinkers who taught that God can be known only through faith or religious tradition, e.g. Louis Bautain.

Conclusion

My position may seem paradoxical: natural theology is perennially attractive, yet it is not necessarily the foundation of theistic belief (and some would say that it should not be so). Of course, some people may be led to religious faith through a consideration of theistic arguments — perhaps a modern example of St Clement of Alexandria's belief that philosophy served as a preparation for the gospel for the Greeks, somewhat as the Law prepared the Jews for the coming of Christ.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in my experience, such a thing is rare.¹¹ Wittgenstein is, I think, nearer the mark when he claims that religious believers who have furnished proofs of God's existence have done so in order to give their belief an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs.¹² In other words, natural theology is usually retrospective and apologetical. But this, again, may explain its perennial appeal.

- 1 J.J.C. Smart, 'The Existence of God', in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London, 1955), pp.45-6.
- 2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics', *Philosophical Review* vol.74 (1965), pp.3-12. The lecture was written in 1929 or 1930, but only published posthumously.
- 3 See, for example, D.Z.Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts: Closing Epistemic Divides* (London, 2000), pp.203-7, and *Belief Change and Forms of Life* (London, 1986), pp.91-2, for a point similar to that made by Smart.
- 4 John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (London, 1964), p.179.
- 5 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol.11, pt. 1, trans T.H.L.Parker *et al.* (Edinburgh, 1957), pp.80-1. Calvin himself taught that sure knowledge of God can come only through faith in His revelation through Jesus Christ; our reason has been partially weakened and corrupted by the Fall, so that 'a shapeless ruin is all that remains' (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.ii.sect. 12). Nevertheless, at the beginning of his *Institutes* he also taught that God has endured all men, even barbarous heathens and those professing atheism, with some idea of His Godhead (I.iii. 1-2); hence we may behold Him in the 'elegant structure of the world', as in a kind of mirror (I.v. 1), for the heavens and the earth present us with innumerable proofs of God's wondrous wisdom, e.g. the motions of the heavenly bodies or the structure of the human frame (I.v.2).
- 6 Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Reason* (New York, 1983), pp.64, 84-9, and *What is Faith?* (Oxford, 1992), pp.44, 57-60.
- 7 Ibn 'Ata' Illah, *Intimate Discourse* no.19, in Ibn 'Ata' Illah, *The Book of Wisdom and Intimate Conversations*, trans. V. Denner and W.M.Thackston, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (London, 1979), p.123.
- 8 C.F.Delaney (ed.), *Religion and Rationality* (Notre Dame, 1979), p.54.
- 9 Dogmatic Constitution 'de fide catholica', ch.2 (Denzinger 1785).
- 10 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* (Miscellanies), Bk.I, ch.5.
- 11 But see David Conway, *The Rediscovery of Wisdom. From Here to Antiquity in Quest of Sophia* (London, 2000), for a recent defence of philosophical theism by someone apparently unsympathetic to revealed religion.
- 12 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. P.Winch (Oxford, 1980), p.85e.