



A Critical Study of Karl Barth's Opposition to Natural Theology

Michel Aghamalian* | Amir Abbas Ali Zamani** | Abbas Yazdani***

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Abstract

Critical analysis of Karl Barth's opposition to natural theology shows that it is demonstrably based on a narrow understanding of natural theology and is mostly shaped through his reaction to the misuse of theological concepts during the heydays of Hitler's rule over Germany. In his increasing opposition to natural theology in its various implications and forms, Barth seems to have been basing his arguments on ontological, epistemological, biblical and practical grounds as he leaned heavily on revelation as the sole basis of all that pertains to the formation of faith and dogma. By engaging Barth in the aforementioned areas, it will be shown that Barth's arguments fall short of consistency in that they contain false designations of natural theology by focusing on a limited and out-dated version of it, an inherent vicious circularity, a highly selective interpretation of respective biblical texts as well as a fallacy of relevance. It will be argued that the concept of revealed theology is not necessarily opposed to a constructive approach to natural theology, which seeks to appreciate the manifest glory of God in creation as an unfolding secret observed and understood through the rational faculties within the human mind.



Keywords

Natural theology, revelation, John Calvin, otherness.

* PhD candidate, Philosophy of Religion, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding Author) | r.michel.agh@gmail.com

** Associate professor, Philosophy of Religion, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran | amir_alizamani@ut.ac.ir

*** Associate professor, Philosophy of Religion, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran | a.yazdani@ut.ac.ir



Introduction

Karl Barth (1886-1968), the prominent Swiss Reformed theologian, after turning away from theological liberalism for its apparent flaws and shortcomings, especially in the way it considered the concept of God as a given of human experience and culture, moved toward a new understanding of theological method and prolegomena, one as solely based on God's self-revelation in his incarnate Word. In doing so, he was heavily influenced by what Søren Kierkegaard called "infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity". He was also inspired by the "strange new world" he found in the Bible as he started to read and study it anew in the light of the writings of early reformers and theologians. The epistemological implication of believing in an unbridgeable chasm between God and humankind led Barth into a complete and decisive denial of natural theology including what could be understood of God from scrutinizing culture. Hence, he got increasingly critical of natural theology in all its forms and implications. His opposition was for the most part fueled by what he understood as natural theology's lending force and credibility to the dominant Nazi ideology.

Summary

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, as Barth's more rigid views are fading away and being recognized as time-bound excessive reactions, it is high time for theologians interested in Barth's legacy to reconsider his basic views on natural theology. For the last decades being Barthian, at least for a significant number of theologians, seems to have been tantamount to having negative conceptions of natural theology. Though, for yet another group, this has not been the case. This mood seems to have been changing recently with some illuminative books being written by those in traditions not unlike Barth's own. However, as much as a sufficient understanding of Barth is a prolegomenon to understanding the modern theological trends, very little has been done in Farsi to this effect. Mostly in his theological landmark, *Der Romerbrief* as well as his theological unfinished five-volume tome, *Church Dogmatics*, Barth seems to base his arguments against natural theology on the following four grounds:

1. Ontological. God is wholly the other. For Barth the very otherness of God excludes any possibility of *analogia entis*, that is getting to know God through seeking a point of contact in the very being of man as a creature in the image and likeness of God.
2. Argument on the basis of the *noetic effects* of sin. Here Barth confirms the

effect of the fall on the human mind and stands in the long tradition of theologians who have argued against the autonomous human reason, which is capable of arriving at the truth without the help of revelation.

3. Argument based on the seemingly absence of hints to the necessity or the possibility of natural theology in the Bible. For Barth, the first commandment is a prohibition against any form of natural theology.
4. Argument based on the misuse of natural theology in the hands of the Nazi regime. From what follows it becomes clear that 1) and 2) are among the strongest arguments of Barth, whereas 4) provides the context for a better understanding of Barth's vigorous opposition to natural theology. By using the content analysis methodology, the present paper engages Barth's views as they are presented in his magnum opus, *Church Dogmatics* (in Ger: *Kirchliche Dogmatik*) as well as his landmark study of *The Epistle to the Romans*. It will be shown that Barth is too selective in his dealings with the biblical texts. His whimsical interpretation is more of an eisegesis (reading into the text) rather than a proper exegesis of the relevant texts. Meanwhile, Barth defines natural theology in a demonstrably narrow sense.

In order to speak against the atrocities of the Third Reich he did not have to ride roughshod over any possibility of natural theology. Meanwhile, in spite of being heavily influenced and reinvigorated by the reformed tradition, Barth in his unrelenting opposition to the natural theology, seems to turn his back on the very tradition that speaks of the manifest glory of God in the world of creation. The present paper proposes that there is a necessity as well as a possibility for natural theology even in the tradition to which Barth is an heir. Some fresh voices shouldn't be ignored as they are in the same breath giving importance to the revealed truth as well as to the rational faculties of the human mind.

Main Resources

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