

## WHAT IS “NATURAL” IN NATURAL THEOLOGY?

[TEXT USED FOR THE PRESENTATION AT THE XX CONFERENCE OF ESPR AND NOT REVISED]

The aim of this paper is to underline the relevance of the notion of “nature” and to show how from this notion the meaning and the role of natural theology itself change. First of all I will discuss some definitions of natural theology. Then I will individuate four main models of natural theology: (1) the first is typical of Greek philosophy and it intends to speak about gods starting from *physis*; (2) the second was born in the Christian worldview and it is used to dialogue with non-Christians; (3) the third characterizes modern philosophy and it is synonymous with rational theology; (4) the last has been proposed recently by analytic contemporary philosophers of religion who have re-founded natural theology on the instances posed by the nature of human beings. Finally, I will discuss the relevance and the fruitfulness of this last model in our age.

### **Defining *natural theology***

Natural Theology can broadly be understood as the systematic reflection on the relationship between human experience and the transcendent reality. Even if we assume that *transcendent* can be appreciated as the world of the divine, the question about what kind of experience is at the basis of natural theology remains. Starting from the concept of “nature” does not help us, not only because of the intrinsic ambiguity of this notion<sup>1</sup>, but also because we have to specify which nature is taken into consideration: the nature of natural phenomena, the nature of human beings or even the nature of God? In the first case it is still necessary to determine the level at which natural phenomena are regarded: the mere level of the observable world, the level of human interaction with it or the level of human culture and sociality, in which ideas and values are modulated, developed and transmitted in a way that goes beyond the individual observer and reflector?

The adjective *natural* is often used to distinguish natural theology from other types of theology, as the revealed or the dogmatic ones. But this distinction could be conceived as a separation, or as a polarity. Historically the expression *natural theology* was born from another distinction due to Varro who distinguished the mythical (*mythikon*) theology, the natural (*physikon*) theology and the political (civil) theology<sup>2</sup>. This passage was used by Augustine<sup>3</sup> who, following

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Torrance (ed.), *The Concept of Nature*, Oxford university Press, Oxford 1992 and G. Naddaf, *The Greek Concept of Nature*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2005.

<sup>2</sup> See Varro, *Antiquitatum rerum divinarum et humanarum*, I, 11.

Paul's epistles, also proposed a distinction between a natural knowledge of God, the theology of grace and the theology of glory<sup>4</sup>.

One of the common definitions on natural theology in our days is due to William Alston: *the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that do not presuppose any religious beliefs*<sup>5</sup>. Even if this is the common view, a look at the western thought suggests the following definition as really traditional:

Traditionally, "natural theology" has commonly meant something like this: that "by nature," that is, just by being human beings, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least a capacity for such awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible<sup>6</sup>.

## **Natural theology in Greek philosophy: nature as natural phenomena**

The study of natural theology in Greek philosophy, even if this label is not used, involves the study for the existence of a first principle<sup>7</sup>. Usually for Greek philosophers a god functions as a hypothetical entity<sup>8</sup>. Accordingly, natural theology is pursued as part of the larger scientific enterprise in which the Presocratics are engaged.

It is in Xenophanes that we can discover the first clear instance of the Ionian speculative approaches applied to natural theology. He attacks the theology of the poets and he offers as a substitute a form

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<sup>3</sup> See Augustine, *Civitas Dei*, VI, 5.

<sup>4</sup> See Augustine, *Civitas Dei*, VIII, 9.

<sup>5</sup> W.P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1991, p. 289. The quotation goes on so: *We begin from the mere existence of the world, or the teleological order of the world, or the concept of God, and we try to show that when we think through the implication of our starting point we are led to recognize the existence of a being that possesses attributes sufficient to identify Him as God [...]. The credentials of this enterprise have often been challenged in the modern era. Hume and Kant are prominent among the challenges. Its death has repeatedly been reported, but like the phoenix it keeps rising from its ashes in ever new guises. [...] As for myself, though I have no tendency to suppose that the existence of God can be demonstratively proved from extrareligious premises, I find certain of the arguments to be not wholly lacking in cogency. [...] This characterization of natural theology sticks closely to the classically recognized "arguments for the existence of God", but it need not be construed that narrowly. It also includes attempts to show that we can attain the best understanding of this or that area of our experience or sphere of concern - morality, human life, society, human wickedness, science, art, mathematics, or whatever - if we look at it from the standpoint of a theistic, or more specifically Christian, metaphysics.* See also A. Kenny, *Is Natural Theology Possible?*, in *What is Faith? Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1992, pp. 62-74.

<sup>6</sup> J. Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, Clarendon, Oxford 1993, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> See L.P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy. Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology*, Routledge, London 1990 and W. Jaeger, *Die Theologie der frühen griechischen Denker*, Stuttgart 1953.

<sup>8</sup> See S. Jaki, *The Ways of Science and the Roads to God*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978.

of theology based upon arguments: for these reasons it seems appropriate to call Xenophanes the first natural theologian.. The plausible conclusion of his reasoning is that the *arche* of the *kosmos* is a *nous*<sup>9</sup>.

The identification of *arche* with *nous* was completed by Plato, thanks to the notion of form.

Aristotle's repudiation of Platonism leaves intact the idea of an *arche* and the centrality of *nous*. He identifies his first philosophy with natural theology. The intimate connection between the unmoved mover and its primary effect, an everlasting, continuous motion, loom large in *metaphysics* as Aristotle attempts both to satisfy the exigencies of proof in natural theology and to locate the primary referent of being in the science of being.

The Stoics, having rejected the grounds for positing separate substances, are more willing to argue that there is a genuine theology which is, in fact, a part of physics. This identification between theology and physics, better between the adjective *natural* of *natural theology* with *physis*, entails the rejection of theology as a science of being and it implies a materialistic view.

The philosophy of Plotinus is the culmination of an entire tradition of thought about god. He interrupts the link between natural theology and *physis* typical of Greek thought and, under the influence of Christianity, maintains that a metaphysical argument is itself constitutive of religious activity<sup>10</sup>. He uses previous arguments of natural theology, but all of this proof incorporates the closely related metaphysical and personal religious paths.

### **The nature as creation: Christian natural theology**

During the time of the Patristic and early Christian era, Greek Church Fathers began to incorporate arguments for the existence of God into their sacred-theological investigations. In other words, they created a sacred theology in which they took their point of departure from the Scriptures, but in which they also incorporated ideas from Greek philosophy. The arguments for the existence of God were meant to build a bridge between what can be known about God on the basis of reason and what God has revealed about himself in the Bible. The arguments were meant to show

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<sup>9</sup> See L.P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy. Studies in the Early Hhistory of Natural Theology*, Routledge, London 1990, pp. 18-20.

<sup>10</sup> See L.P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy. Studies in the Early Hhistory of Natural Theology*, Routledge, London 1990, pp. 201-212.

not so much that God actually exists, but rather that the Christian's belief in God is not irrational or mythical.

In general the Church Fathers of the early centuries, however, did not develop any new arguments for the existence of God. We find this for the first time in the work of Augustine. For my purposes it is important to note that Augustine developed these arguments in order to bring the skeptics and agnostics to the realization that God indeed exists. Furthermore, the arguments were meant to convince the believers of the rational credibility of what they had already accepted in faith.

For Christians nature is not something independent from the divine, because it is seen as creation<sup>11</sup>. So in nature the *logos* emerges. Moreover the Christ event renders all theology "natural" because in it the natural order is redeemed and so the incarnation completes the doctrine of *imago Dei* that already allows human beings to speak about God. The most important and influential discussion of the issue can be found in the tradition which identifies the *imago Dei* with human reason, a resource which is meant to be used to seek and apprehend God.

Also protestant approaches to natural theology have also been shaped by their understanding of the *imago Dei*. Calvin's affirmation of the legitimacy of a natural theology, for example, rests on his fundamental belief that humanity, as bearer of God's image, possesses at least some capability of discerning the presence and character of God from reflecting on the external order of the world and the internal *sensus divinitatis*<sup>12</sup>.

Natural theology is relevant for the relationship between faith and reason in the concreteness of human life:

Considered in its own right, the object of faith is God himself, but since (in this life) our minds cannot comprehend God directly or immediately, the object of faith, considered from the point of view of human knowers, is not God but propositions about him. In Aquinas's view, assent to the propositions of faith lies between knowledge and opinion. [...] Nothing in this position of Aquinas's denies reason a role in the life of faith. In a tradition going back at least as far as Augustine, Aquinas takes *understanding* the proposition of faith to be the outcome of a process for which faith is a necessary condition. Having one acquired faith in the way spelled out here, the believer is then in a position to reflect philosophically on

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<sup>11</sup> See N. Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Creation. Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa contra gentiles II*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1999; Id., *The Metaphysics of Providence. Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa contra gentiles III*, «Medieval Philosophy and Theology», 9 (2000); Id., *The Metaphysics of Theism. Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa contra gentiles I*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997.

<sup>12</sup> See Calvin, *Institutes*, I, XV, 3.

the propositions of faith, to engage in the enterprise of natural or philosophical theology. But in Aquinas's view it would be a mistake to suppose that faith is *acquired* by such an exercise of reason<sup>13</sup>.

It is thus clear that medieval natural theology is at the service of an authentic human existence, because it supports human search for happiness. But this planning was destined to change radically in the 17th century.

### **Nature and rationality: the Enlightenment deism**

Even if in the modern age a lot of natural theologies were proposed, most of them can be retraced to the Enlightenment project. It is widely accepted that part of the attitude of the mind that shaped the Enlightenment is an appeal to the universality of reason and of nature as objective grounds for judgement. This represents a move away from the classical Greek and medieval model of reason (*logos*) as “an ordering principle inherent in reality” and its replacement with an epistemologically inflated notion of human faculty that “submits all reality to the structures of the mind”. Natural theology becomes synonymous of rational theology. Such has been its influence that there is now an automatic presumption that natural theology designates the enterprise of arguing directly from a neutral observation of nature to demonstrate the existence of God apodically. It is not difficult to see how the notion of natural theology conveys the idea of secure, public, invariant and reliable knowledge of the divine. It is not yet a reflection on theism, but it is its substitute: deism. The divine is an entity that supports one of the scientific explanations of the universe: a God of the gap<sup>14</sup>.

The Enlightenment approach to natural theology is thus also grounded on the assumption that humans already are, or could become, nonparticipatory observers of nature. A paradigmatic example of this way of thinking is Robert Boyle's 1674 tract *The Excellency of Theology Compared with Natural Theology*.

The influence of the Enlightenment conception of natural theology reached the Nineteenth century with Paley's *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*

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<sup>13</sup> Stump, E., ‘Aquinas on Faith and Goodness.’ In MacDonald, S. (ed.), *Being and Goodness. The Concept of the God in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 187 and 207. See B. Davies, E. Stump, *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, pp. 4-7.

<sup>14</sup> See J.J.C. Smart, J. Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, Blackwell, Oxford 2003 (2).

(1802) where the idea of a self-evident nature is perpetuated as the rather blithe and breezy cosmic optimistic idea about natural phenomena. The reader of *Natural Theology* encounters a paean of praise for the goodness of the natural order.

It is relevant to note that the Protestants' reaction against natural theology is aimed at its interpretation presented in this section. To clarify the Protestant attitude toward natural theology it is instructive to quote the Barth and Emil Brunner controversy in 1934<sup>15</sup>.

### **Natural theology in recent perspectives: starting from human nature**

The legacy of Enlightenment natural theology in postmodern thought lies in the underlining of the relevance of human beings, of their cognitive faculties and of their freedom, but with two relevant clarifications: the nature of human beings does not consist in mere rationality and the natural phenomena are not neutral.

The first point has been studied by Reformed Epistemologists as Alvin Plantinga, William P. Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff and William Wainwright.

To sum up the prospect of reformed epistemologists about natural theology I propose the following definition. Natural theology is the study of the legitimacy, of the content and of the consequence of the propositions about God's existence and characteristics. This study uses philosophical methods and starts from the analysis of the human (especially cognitive) faculties.

About the second point, according to which it is relevant to remember, in proposing a natural theology that natural phenomena are not neutral, Alister E. McGrath has suggested an interesting reflection, starting from the distinction between *seen* and *perceived* or *seen as*. Natural phenomena are not merely seen: they are seen *as* something. Human beings are part of the natural order which they observe and interpret through intentionality<sup>16</sup>. In this respect natural theology could be understood as the outcome of reading nature in the light of a certain religion. This natural theology does not mainly furnish evidence, but it promotes an intellectual and an affective itinerary<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See J.W. Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance, 1916-1936*, Peter Lang, New York 2001.

<sup>16</sup> See M. Damonte, *Wittgenstein, Tommaso e la cura dell'intenzionalità*, MEF, Firenze 2009.

<sup>17</sup> See Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and F. Percivale, *L'ascesa naturale a Dio nella filosofia di Rosmini*, Città Nuova, Roma 2000 (2).

Another interesting proposal for a renewed natural theology is due to Wittgensteinians Thomists. I'm referring to Peter Geach, Elizabeth M. Anscombe, Anthony Kenny, John Haldane, Brian Davies and David Brain. In particular natural theology is the application of logical rigour to religious beliefs; this rigour is the request of consistency.

Using a Wittgensteinian suggestion, it can be considered a *linguistic therapy* or a philosophical *examination of conscience* for religions.

In the light of the three proposals produced above, natural theology can be appreciated not as a necessary and sufficient condition to assent to religious beliefs, but (1) as an anthropological condition useful for a mature approval and a consistent life of faith and (2) as an epistemic condition necessary to formulate a theological science. Thanks to this definition it is possible to save the philosophical rigour of natural theology and at the same time to change its role<sup>18</sup>.

### **Towards new tasks for natural theology**

Is now clear that any natural theology rests on implicit anthropological assumptions, which are often assumed to be inconsequential for its outcome. Natural theology is to be reconceived as involving every aspect of the human encounter with nature and of the interpersonal relationships, i.e. the rational, the imaginative, the aesthetic and the moral aspects.

The demonstrations of natural theology do not compel the audience, but try to convince it. Nature does not provide proof or evidence for the existence of a deity with some features, but is the place of the *resonance* of God in our experience<sup>19</sup>. The point is not to generate or create the belief in God, but to activate, reinforce and understand it better in order to be able to live in coherence with one's own faith, to confess it, to convey it and also to narrate it through fresh languages.

Natural theology is to be understood to include the totality of human faculties, embracing the human quest for truth, beauty<sup>20</sup> and goodness<sup>21</sup>, to use the three classical transcendentals.

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<sup>18</sup> See M. Damonte, *Towards a New Natural Theology: Between Reformed Epistemology and Wittgensteinian Thomism*, in S.T. Kołodziejczyk, J. Salamon (eds.), *Knowledge, Action, Pluralism*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2013, pp. 113-134.

<sup>19</sup> See A.E. McGrath, *The Open Secret. A New Vision for Natural Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford 2008, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> See R. Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999; U. Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1986 and Id., *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1988.

The appeal of natural theology to the entire human nature means that human defects, the dimension of suffering and also evil have to be taken into consideration. As a consequence of this the apophatic role of natural theology regarding divine nature has to be reassessed: in fact it must be able to protect mystery. This new natural theology helps to understand that there is no reason to think that the exclusion of the absurd means excluding mystery<sup>22</sup>.

Natural theology does not merely augment information, but it promotes a change of attitude. The enterprise of natural theology is thus one of *discernment*<sup>23</sup>. The correct question for a new natural theology is: in what way can human beings, reflecting on *nature* by means of *natural* processes, become aware of the transcendent and formulate true propositions about it?

In the age of globalization and of (at least) supposed religious wars<sup>24</sup>, this natural theology is able to promote an authentic and fruitful interreligious dialogue because it unquestionably lays a foundation upon which a theology of religion may be constructed. The task of engaging in debate with other world views corresponds, at the beginning of the third millenium, to what once was known as natural theology.

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<sup>21</sup> See W.J. Wainwright, *Religion and Morality*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2005 and I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge, London 1970.

<sup>22</sup> See K.L. Schmitz, *Theological Clearances: Foreground to a Rational Recovery of God*, in E.T. Long (ed.), *Prospects for Natural Theology*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington 1992, pp. 32-3 and Micheletti, M. 2010. *La teologia razionale nella filosofia analitica*, Roma: Carocci, pp. 14 and 37.

<sup>23</sup> A.E. McGrath, *The Open Secret. A New Vision for Natural Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford 2008, pp. 3; 5.

<sup>24</sup> See M. Damonte, *Confrontation Between Civilization, Religions and Professions of Faith*, «Études Maritainiennes / Maritain Studies», 25 (2009), pp. 46-57.