

## “From Nature to Theology to Revelation – Is there a place for *theologia naturalis*?”

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### (I) Background

Humans have made a lot of attempts to find ways to know God, their creator. “Theology” is “the science of God or of religion; the science which treats of the existence, character and attributes of God, His laws and government, the doctrines we are to believe, and the duties we are to practise; divinity; ..... the knowledge derivable from the Scriptures, the systematic exhibition of revealed truth, the science of Christian faith and life.”<sup>1</sup>

Since the first century, there have been a lot of discourse regarding “*theologia naturalis*” and “*theologia revelata*”. To see if the two school of thoughts can meet at any point, or if the two school of thoughts run parallel to each other with no meeting point being possible, one would need to know how one defines “*theologia naturalis*”. Does this mean the *possibility* of knowing God through nature? Or does this mean the *ability* of man to know God *solely* through nature based on reasoning and without recourse to any other types of revelation? The difference between the two lies in the fact that the former only talks about a possibility of getting to know God through nature, and does not exclude the involvement of other types of revelation for man to get a true knowledge of God. The latter says that man can get to know God solely by and through nature and his reasoning ability.

This paper will look at the definition and development of *theologia naturalis* from different perspectives. Through this process, it is the intention of this paper to show the readers that *theologia naturalis* and *theologia revelata* can actually complement each other. There is indeed a proper place for *theologia naturalis* in theological studies.

### (II) What is “*theologia naturalis*” ?

There has not been a uniform understanding among theologians of what exactly is “*theologia naturalis*”. The following are some of the various definitions put forward by theologians in the past:

#### 1. Knowledge of God through reasoning *alone*

*The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*<sup>2</sup> defines “natural theology” as “the knowledge of God ..... accessible to all rational human beings without recourse to any special or supposedly supernatural revelation...” This definition would mean that

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<sup>1</sup> Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913), s.v. “theology”.

<sup>2</sup> A E McGrath, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, (1993), s.v. “natural theology”.

man is able to use his rational self and his reasoning (including all things accessible to his rational being like nature and creation) to derive and prove the existence of God, without the need to be supplemented by any other types of supernatural revelation, including the revelation of God through Jesus Christ.

This is an extreme view, which when taken strictly, means that *theologia naturalis* is the beginning and the end of the road leading to a true knowledge of God. Taking this view, one would be arguing that man can know God through nature and creation alone, that man will be able to derive the existence of God and the true nature of God through nature and creation alone. This view is to be distinguished from a second way to define “*theologia naturalis*” as set out below.

## 2. Knowledge of God through creation as a starting point

There is another school of thought which absorbs the above definition that “*theologia naturalis*” is the knowledge of God that can be accessible to all rational human beings, and is derived through a process of reasoning based on a set of premises and assumptions derived through nature and creation. However, this second school of thought does not end there. “*It (natural theology) begins, and without it there is no sound beginning of religious faith and life. But it is but a beginning. It is not conclusive. It is in itself essentially partial, preliminary and so cannot be conclusive.*”<sup>3</sup>

### (a) Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas offered his famous arguments for the existence of God based on five premises taken from generally accepted universal human experience. This is the famous “Five Ways” in *Summa theologiae* (ST) I, q. 2, a. 3.<sup>4</sup> :

- (i) Everything in this world which is moved must be moved by something else (motion can be taken more broadly than local motion and at the very least can include change or alteration). Therefore we must arrive at some first mover which is moved by nothing whatsoever, and this everyone understands to be God.<sup>5</sup> Wippel however queried whether Aquinas had succeeded in proving that there is only one such first mover in his reasoning.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald Heard, *Is God Evident?* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 1.

<sup>4</sup> J.F. Wippel, “The Five Ways”, chap. 7 in *Thomas Aquinas, Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. B. Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 159.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

- (ii) Everything has a cause, but nothing can be the efficient cause for itself, otherwise it would be prior to itself, and is therefore impossible. However, there must be a “first efficient cause”, i.e. some uncaused cause, which is named “God” by everyone. Wippel again queried whether there could be more than one such first causes, and whether the first cause of the Second Way is identical to the unmoved first mover in the First Way.<sup>7</sup>
- (iii) Everything has the possibility of existing and not existing. However, if all things are capable of not existing, there could be nothing in reality at some point in time. Therefore Aquinas concluded that not all beings are possible beings; but there must be some necessary being who is only dependent on nothing but itself for its being, and this is the being referred by everyone as God. As with the First and Second Ways, his argument will remain incomplete until it has been shown that there can only be one such being.<sup>8</sup>
- (iv) There is something that is truest and best and noblest and hence also a being to the maximum degree. This is the cause of beings for all other beings, as well as of their goodness and every other perfection. And we call this God.<sup>9</sup>
- (v) The Fifth Way is based on the way things are governed. “Things which lack cognition do not tend to an end unless they are directed [*to it*] by some knowing and intelligent being, as an arrow is directed [*to its target*] by an archer.” Therefore there is some intelligent being by which all natural things are ordered to their end, and this we call God.<sup>10</sup> Again Wippel has queried whether there is only one such intelligent being.<sup>11</sup>

While the Five Ways establish the existence of some supreme intelligence which is the first and unmoved mover, the first efficient cause or the absolute maximum of all beings, there are questions which are revealed by the “Five Ways” and cannot be answered by human reasoning, for example, is there only one first mover, one first efficient cause and one such intelligent being by which all natural things are ordered to their end? If so, are these all one and the same being? And what is there to prove this is God?

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 171-174.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 174-179.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 179-186.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 191.

It should be noted that Aquinas denied that God's existence can be self-evident.<sup>12</sup> Aquinas made it clear that there are two ways to attain some knowledge of God, the first way through creation (*via per creaturas*), and the second through revelation (*via per revelationem*).<sup>13</sup>

*“For both ways the divine truth is but mediately present to the human intellect. In the former, the medium is the hierarchical order of natures in the world, the result from God's providential plan. This medium not only presents an imperfect likeness of God's essence, it is known adequately by the human intellect only with great difficulty. Human beings can reach only a faint knowledge of God by pursuing the way upward in creation with reason ..... The insufficiency of natural reason with respect to the perfect knowledge of God is one motive for God's descending through revelation to human knowledge. .... God's word is made known through the speaking of the prophets and apostles, through preaching that aims to instill faith in those listening. .... The truth of the revealed message does not appear to be seen; it has to be believed.”<sup>14</sup>*

The central issue of *Contra Gentiles* 1.5 is the limitedness of natural reason in relation to the truth.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Aquinas said that “In order that man might have a firmer knowledge of Him, God revealed certain things about Himself that transcend the human intellect.”<sup>16</sup>

It is therefore very clear that to Aquinas natural theology is just the beginning of our search for the true knowledge of God. Natural theology does not lead us to the end, and does not exclude God's revelation to us through other means.

#### (b) Calvin

Calvin argues that there is a natural knowledge of God accessible to all human beings which is independent of God's revelation in scripture. This knowledge of God is natural as (i) it is derived from “the course of nature” (I. v.7) and secondly that it is intrinsic to “human nature” (I. v. 4). Calvin says that in the wider creation, God “revealed himself and daily discloses himself” (I. v. 9), and that this natural knowledge of God has been divinely imparted.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>13</sup> Rudi A. Te Velde, “Natural Reason in the *Summa contra Gentiles*”, chap. 5 in *Thomas Aquinas, Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. B. Davies, 134.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Rudi A. Te Velde, “Natural Reason in the *Summa contra Gentiles*”, chap. 5 in ed. B. Davies, *Thomas Aquinas, Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, 130.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas, “*Summa contra Gentiles* 4.1 (Pera no. 3341), quoted in Rudi A. Te Velde, “Natural Reason in the *Summa contra Gentiles*”, chap. 5 in ed. B. Davies, *Thomas Aquinas, Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, 134.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, “*Institutes of the Christian Religion*”, quoted in E. Adams, “Calvin's View of Natural Knowledge of God”, *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, no. 3 (November 2001), 280-292. Various passages from Calvin's book are

Calvin then goes on to talk about nature and scripture being two separate sources of divine revelation. Natural revelation is a human being's first point of access to God, while on a higher level, natural knowledge of God is secondary and subordinate to scriptural knowledge. The two are in agreement and in fact, scriptural revelation adds to and deepens human being's natural knowledge of God. This is because a sinful human mind cannot rightly perceive God and distorts the evidences from nature so as to arrive not at God but at idols. Calvin had suggested that had history taken a different course and we were now living in unfallen conditions, natural revelation would alone be sufficient to secure a right standing with God and to pass over into eternal life. This is not because natural revelation has become defective since the fall. The revelatory light of nature shines just as brightly, but the human eyes fail to see to its radiance.<sup>18</sup>

Again, we can see that Calvin supports natural theology in that he believes in God's revelation in the *sensus divinitatis* and God's revelation in His works, but he did not hold the view that such revelation in itself would give us a true knowledge of God because of the presence of sin in this world. God's revelation in the scripture is therefore equally important and can exist together with God's revelation in nature.

In his article on "Calvin's View of Natural Knowledge of God", Edward Adams concluded by an observation that "It is possible ...to recognise and appreciate (with Brunner) Calvin's highly positive evaluation of natural revelation, without underplaying his extreme pessimism about human ability to appropriate it and reach the goal for which it was originally intended (stressed by Barth)."<sup>19</sup>

This would conveniently lead us to look at the views of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth on this subject of "*theologia naturalis*".

(c) *Emil Brunner / Karl Barth*

Brunner said that when dealing with the problem posed by "*theologia naturalis*", one is looking at the question of whether God can be known outside the historical revelation. This comprises two related questions which are often confused with each other: (i) the question of revelation in creation, and (ii) the question of man's natural knowledge of God. He affirmed that there is revelation in creation as the creator will understandably imprint the mark of his spirit upon his creation. However, "natural man" may not be able to perceive this divine revelation in creation due to the presence of sin, and hence man

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quoted in parenthesis in this paper.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., quoting Calvin, "Institutes of the Christian Religion", (I. v.14).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 292.

may not be able to derive a correct and valid natural knowledge of God through the divine revelation in creation alone. This is however not to say that “natural theology” does not validly exist. He also stresses that any denial of “natural theology” should not be a denial of the reality of revelation in creation.<sup>20</sup>

In his “Nature and Grace”, Brunner further explained and elaborated on his views of “natural theology”. Brunner did not dispute about the revelation in Jesus Christ, but maintained that there is a “double revelation: of one in creation which only he can recognise in all its magnitude, whose eyes have been opened by Christ; and of second in Jesus Christ in whose bright light he can clearly perceive the former. As the world is the creation of God, God as the creator is recognizable as he has left an imprint in nature. Hence creation of the world is a revelation, a self-commission of God. The sinful nature of man may lead to a misinterpretation of the divine revelation in creation and idolatry. Hence only the Christian, i.e. the man who stands within the revelation in Christ, has the true natural knowledge of God.<sup>21</sup>

Karl Barth in his “No!” reply disagreed that the one true God can be *de facto* known by all men without Christ, without the Holy Spirit, even given that knowledge of him is distorted and dimmed and darkened by sin, and that he is “misrepresented” and “turned into idols”.<sup>22</sup> This does not appear to be very much different from Brunner’s position that only a Christian who stands within the revelation in Christ has the true knowledge of God.

Brunner argued that there is a point of contact for human to receive the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, and this point of contact is ‘the formal *imago Dei* which not even the sinner has lost, i.e. the fact that man is man, the “*humanitas*”’. “*Humanitas*” has two meanings: capacity for words<sup>23</sup> and responsibility. Man’s capacity for words and his receptivity of the Word of God (which is to be distinguished from whether he accepts or rejects the Word of God) includes not only the *humanum* in the narrower sense, but everything connected with the “natural” knowledge of God. If there is no natural knowledge of God, the Word of God can never reach man. The Word of God reaching

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<sup>20</sup> Brunner, E., *The Christian Doctrine of God, Dogmatics: Vol. I*. Translated by O. Wyon. Philadelphia, The Westminster Press 1949, 132 – 136.

<sup>21</sup> *Natural Theology comprising “Nature and Grace” by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply “No!” by Dr. Karl Barth*. Translated by P. Fraenkel, (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 26-27.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>23</sup> In this connection, it must be noted that Karl Barth has constantly attributed to Emil Brunner in his “No!” reply a translation of “capacity for revelation” rather than “capacity for words” or “capacity for speech” as being one of the two meanings of “*humanitas*”. This is probably due to the fact that “the Word” is a familiar synonym for revelation. Brunner was said “to profess as great a horror as had done his opponent at the idea that man has a “capacity for revelation”, if this be understood in the active sense of having any control over it, any part ...in the revealing. The capacity he claims for man is, he explains, the purely passive capacity to be reached by the revelation and to hear the Word when it is uttered.” (Taken from John Baillie, Introduction to *Natural Theology comprising “Nature and Grace” by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply “No!” by Dr. Karl Barth*, 5)

man does not mean that man will automatically understand entirely and correctly. However, this does not mean that a point of contact for divine grace is not necessary.<sup>24</sup>

Karl Barth found it difficult to accept that the formal *imago Dei* is the point of contact for the Word of God to reach man, on the basis that this formal *imago Dei* is not lost even by the sinner. He asked what relevance there could be of the formal responsibility and the ability to make decisions to a “capacity” which man possesses and which exists in him anterior to divine revelation.<sup>25</sup> On the presumption that man is “a sinner through and through”, how can there be a formal *imago Dei* which Brunner said is to include “what the natural man knows of God, of the law, and of his own dependence upon God”.<sup>26</sup>

Brunner then went on to say very clearly that “the personal God meets man personally. That involves the continuance of self-consciousness.” He explained this by citing 1 Corinthians 2:10-12, which he interpreted to mean that as far as we have the Holy Spirit, there takes place in us an act of divine self-consciousness through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit remains in us, but never turns into an identity.<sup>27</sup> What is however not clear, and this is reflected in Karl Barth’s “No!” reply, is that Brunner did not say clearly if by referring to the life of man in Christ through the Holy Spirit, he is presupposing a knowledge of and respect for the true God which knowledge precedes the revelation in Jesus Christ and that this presupposition forms its *point of contact* in man.<sup>28</sup>

It is apparent that when Brunner talked about “the personal God meeting man” and the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit in man to create a divine self-consciousness in man, he was affirming a second type of revelation – the revelation in Jesus Christ. This echoes the point made by Brunner in the earlier part of his “Nature and Grace” that there is a double revelation – revelation in creation and revelation in Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup> Brunner had never excluded revelation in Jesus Christ when he talked about revelation in creation. “Natural theology” then has a place for the second type of revelation?

It is quite clear from the exchange of letters and the earlier exchange of letters between Barth and Brunner that the difference between the two theologians lies in the fact that Brunner’s attention focuses on the human side of the divine/human relationship, whereas Barth’s focus is on the revealed God alone. For Barth the proper object of theology is God in His revelation, but for Brunner theology must not only speak about God, but must also speak decisively about the believing subject.<sup>30</sup> It is noted in his “No!”

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>25</sup> See footnote 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 91-93.

<sup>29</sup> See footnote 21.

<sup>30</sup> J. W. Hart, “The Barth-Brunner Correspondence”, in *For the Sake of the Word: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial*

reply to Brunner, Barth argued that theology must “turn away from all ‘true’ or ‘false’ natural theology” so that the church can “learn again to understand revelation as *grace* and grace as *revelation*.”<sup>31</sup> It is my view that this statement of Barth would only be true if natural theology cannot accept grace as revelation at all. But this is hardly the case. Natural theology is basically revelation in nature. It does not touch on grace as revelation. In fact, nature cannot exclude grace as creation is an act of grace. Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it.<sup>32</sup>

### (III) From Nature to Theology, i.e. “Knowledge of God”

Now that we have had a brief examination of how different theologians see and define “*theologia naturalis*”, it appears that revelation through nature/creation has only been viewed as a beginning, but has not been viewed as conclusive in the sense that other types of revelation would have no place in “*theologia naturalis*”. How then should the other types of revelation or “*theologia revelata*” be taken into consideration in the context of “*theologia naturalis*”?

As a starting point, it is common understanding and an undisputed fact that it is not possible for man to derive any knowledge of its creator, God, by his *sole effort*. Even if God creates us with the necessary faculty to understand and know Him, we will not be able to understand and know Him fully without any assistance from God. Without any assistance from God, we will only be able to use what is available in and from the human world and the human faculties to understand something which is comprehensible in the human world. Anything which is beyond that is beyond us, and cannot be grasped by us fully and truly if we are to do it solely on our own efforts.

God is a loving and personal God and would want us to know Him. What assistance then has God given us to achieve this purpose?

We cannot deny that we have the whole of creation as a starting point. When a man, believer or otherwise, looks at the world in which he lives, which includes the sun, the moon, the four seasons, the millions of different plants and animals, the air and water that we rely on to survive, and our offsprings who derive their life from their mothers but can then live independently from the mother’s body, surely the one question that he will sooner or later ask himself would be how this world has come about. He may then very soon come to a conclusion that there is an almighty creator who created this world in the first place, and who is still looking after this world while the world goes on and persists. Creation can therefore lead us to know that there is a creator of this world.

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*Theology*, ed. G. Hunsinger (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2004), 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> E.L. Mascall, *He Who Is, A Study in Traditional Theism* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 198.

Revelation in creation is a more logical starting point than revelation in Jesus Christ in one's search for God, especially to someone who has not heard of God at all. (If someone has known God already, they fall outside the ambit of our discussion as they are someone who has already found God and know who God is. For the purpose of this paper, we will look at someone, Mr. X, who has not heard of God at all and is in search of Him to know more about Him.) Assuming that the Holy Spirit has not started to work on Mr. X and that he has had no previous experience or encounters with God, how would we start to tell him about God through the revelation in Jesus Christ? One possible scenario could be as follows:

1. Our friend Mr. X is being told right from the start that more than two thousand years ago, a certain person, Jesus Christ, has come to this world, was crucified and died for our sins, and was resurrected again after three days to bring us eternal life. What would be Mr. X's likely reaction? He would very likely want some proof that Jesus did exist at that time. It should not be difficult to find some reference to Jesus Christ in historical records to show that such a person existed in history. In the same way that we would believe in what our history books tell us about historical figures, such as Hitler or Confucius, there is no reason to doubt the existence of Jesus as recorded in the history books.

2. Having proved that Jesus did exist in history, we would then start to explain to him that He is the son of God and has come to this world to die for our sins. We would expect requests for proof. Being face to face with someone who has not had a chance to know God at all, it would not be very helpful to talk to him about faith, and to ask him to believe first before seeking any understanding of the subject matter of the faith.

The above illustrates the problem of explaining our faith to a rational human being who has in-built in him all the human faculties of "reasoning", which should in the normal course of events lead to "understanding", and then onto "believing" if things are satisfactorily explained and proved to him. When dealing with rational human beings, rational deduction would be a good starting point. This would be the value of using "*theologia naturalis*" as a starting point, as "*theologia naturalis*" is the knowledge of God accessible to all rational human beings, and start with revelation in nature / creation.

Going back to our friend Mr. X, with "*theologia naturalis*" we could handle the situation in a different manner:

1. We can start with God's work of creation and ask Mr. X how this world could have come about in the first place? This world consists of plants, animals, human beings, the sun, the moon, the stars, the universe, air and water, day and night. How did all these come into being,

and who is now maintaining the world so that we continue to have the sun, the moon, the stars, air and water etc. day after day?

2. If Mr. X comes up with the answer that there is probably a creator but he does not know who the creator is, that would be the starting point that we want to get to with Mr. X. If Mr. X talks about science, e.g. the Big Bang Theory, we can continue to ask about the source of the primeval atom which explosion was said to have started the universe under the Big Bang Theory. It should not be too long when Mr. X will have to stop and think about the source of what he thinks could be the beginning of the universe. And he would then have to think about who it is that have created that “source”.

The above hypothetical situation does, on the one hand, show the value of starting off a journey in search of God with something that a rational human being can come to terms with, and on the other hand shows the wisdom of God in leaving His imprint on His works of creation. This is consistent with Barth’s proposition that “*God is God and God is God,*” and that thinking about this God can be faithfully accomplished only if it is “a theology which, like a spinning top, supports itself on only one point.”<sup>33</sup> With “*theologia naturalis*”, we are starting with nature and the fact that nature and the works of creation are God’s works and creation. This world and His works of creation are a type of revelation coming from God direct. We are therefore in a way starting with God in an environment and setting that is given to us by God.

Theologians against “*theologia naturalis*” would argue that revelation in creation should be rejected because it is not possible for human beings to seek God through creation (as they would never be able to know the true God through creation solely). They would also argue that it is not possible for human beings to know God solely relying on reasoning and their own faculties without any direct revelation from God. This proposition is only true to the extent that men are seeking to know God through creation *alone*. But if one is simply saying that creation is a starting point for one to seek knowledge of God, that “*theologia naturalis*” is only the starting point but not the conclusion, and that all searches that start with revelation in nature will need to be completed by revelation in Jesus Christ and the scripture, there will be no problem with “*theologia naturalis*”.

#### **(IV) *Theologia Naturalis* and Biblical Revelation**

Support for “*theologia naturalis*” can be found in the Scripture. An obvious reference to nature and the creation being a form of revelation from God can be found in Psalm 19:1-4 which says:

“*The heavens declare the glory of God;*

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<sup>33</sup> J. W. Hart, “The Barth-Brunner Correspondence”, in *For the Sake of the Word: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. G. Hunsinger, 20, quoting Barth’s letter to Brunner, October 24, 1930.

*the skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
Day after day they pour forth speech;  
Night after night they display knowledge.  
There is no speech or language  
Where their voice is not heard.  
Their voice goes out into all the earth,  
Their words to the ends of the world.”*

It is also quite clear from Paul's words in Romans 1:20 that God created the world to make known His power and His divine nature to man.

*“For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse”*

Revelation in creation is not merely a doctrine formulated by theologians, but is something mentioned specifically in the scripture. There is therefore biblical support for “*theologia naturalis*”. There is also support for “*theologia naturalis*” in the Wisdom literature which I will not go into detail in this paper.<sup>34</sup>

James Barr recalled Barth's strenuous argument against any form of natural theology in his famous debate with Brunner in the 1930s and that Barth had insisted all Christian theology be based on biblical witness to revelation. Barr accordingly stressed that on Barth's own terms the presence of natural theology in the wisdom tradition and elsewhere in the Bible undermines Barth's argument. According to Barr, even though natural theology in wisdom runs contrary to the major trends in biblical theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it constitutes an important and integral part of the biblical heritage.<sup>35</sup>

## **(V) Limitation of *Theologia Naturalis***

Although “*theologia naturalis*” has its value, it also has its limitations:

Firstly, “*theologia naturalis*” can only be a starting point but it cannot be conclusive. Where “*theologia naturalis*” starts with revelation in creation/nature, and brings to man an awareness of a superior being who created nature, and that this is God, we will need to then turn to “*theologia revelata*” to get a true, correct and complete knowledge of God. As Aquinas said, reason tells

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<sup>34</sup> John J. Collins, “Natural theology and biblical tradition: The case of Hellenistic Judaism”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol 60 Issue 1 (Jan. 1998): 1-15.

<sup>35</sup> Leo D. Lefebure, “The Wisdom of God: Dialogue and Natural Theology”, *Christian Century* Vol. 111 Issue 30 (26/10/1994): 984-988.

us that God exists, rather than what, in His inner nature, He is; and reason is supplemented by revelation.<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, although “*theologia revelata*” does not deny “*theologia naturalis*”, revelation does not have its base on reasoning. In fact, faith is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit, and there is a limitation to the role that reason plays in theology.<sup>37</sup> “Reason is not annihilated by revelation, but is supplemented and transformed by it.”<sup>38</sup>

## (VI) Conclusion

In conclusion, *theologia naturalis* and *theologia revelata* do not deny or exclude each other. *Theologia naturalis* looks to revelation in nature and man’s reasoning power, and is the knowledge of God accessible to all rational human beings. The “knowledge of God” so derived is merely the knowledge of the existence of God, and not who God is, as man’s ability to know who God is through nature has been impeded by sin, and a sinful human mind cannot rightly perceive God and distorts the evidences from nature so as to arrive not at God but idols. To answer the question as to who God is, one will need to step out of the ambit of *theologia naturalis* and step over to the realm of *theologia revelata*.

*Theologia revelata* is the knowledge of God through some “supernatural” revelation, and by this, we are referring to revelation in Jesus Christ and the Incarnation, and biblical revelation. Through *theologia revelata*, we will be able to know who God is. *Theologia revelata* therefore supplements *theologia naturalis*. While *theologia naturalis* is the beginning in one’s search for a true and complete knowledge of God, *theologia revelata* provides the conclusion of that search.

To answer the question posed by the title of this paper, we can go from nature to theology and from theology to revelation. Nature is God’s works and a form of revelation as it is an environment provided to us by God and comes directly from God. Revelation by nature leads to a certain knowledge that God exists. This in turn leads us to revelation in Jesus Christ and the scripture - *theologia revelata* - where we will be able to derive the answer to the ultimate question of who God is.

In fact, when Barth says “God is God” (which he understands to be the first and most demanding word of theology), he is referring to the God who is related to and active in the world and in men and women of faith, rather than merely a God who is infinite and transcendent<sup>39</sup> ..... that is, a God who is present in nature and therefore must be capable of

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<sup>36</sup> Mascal, *He Who Is, A Study in Traditional Theism*, 198.

<sup>37</sup> 關啓文：《我信故我思》（香港：學生福音團契，1998），頁76。

<sup>38</sup> Mascal, *He Who Is, A Study in Traditional Theism*, 198.

<sup>39</sup> D. Migliore, “Response to the Barth-Brunner Correspondence”, in *For the Sake of the Word: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. G. Hunsinger (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2004), 45.

being revealed by nature! As man cannot perceive and understand this divine revelation in nature and creation, due to the separation and blinding by sin, man may not be able to derive a correct and valid natural knowledge of God through the divine revelation in creation alone. God therefore gives man more divine revelation in Jesus Christ and in the scripture to supplement what we miss through the divine revelation in creation.

There is indeed a place for *theologia naturalis* notwithstanding all the controversies surrounding it, and this place is right adjacent to *theologia revelata*!