

Reviews

BIBLICAL FAITH AND NATURAL THEOLOGY, by James Barr. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993. Pp.xii + 244. No price given.

What does Barr mean by 'natural theology'? He understands it in a wide sense. On his account, to believe in natural theology is to accept that "just by being human beings, men and women have a certain knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least a capacity for such an awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible" (p.1). On this account, because it is a very open one, writers believing in natural theology would (uncontroversially) include Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Scotus (different as they are in their thinking). Among twentieth century authors, writers believing in natural theology would (again uncontroversially) include (among many others) Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, Alvin Plantinga, H.D. Lewis, P.T Geach, Richard Swinburne, and Herbert McCabe (different as they are in their thinking).

As is well known, however, some Christian thinkers have poured scorn on the notion of natural theology. And they have done so in the name of revelation or Christianity. The idea is that it is part of Christian revelation (and therefore part of Christian theology or Christian truth) that natural theology is impossible. This was the position of Karl Barth. He entirely rejected the notion of natural theology. And he appealed to revelation as an indictment of natural theology.

But where do we look for revelation? To start with, Barth looked to Scripture. And he held that Scripture teaches that natural theology does not exist, that nobody has knowledge of God apart from Christian revelation. But what if Scripture itself sanctions, permits, evidences, or in some other way depends upon natural theology or something like it? This is Barr's principal question. His answer is that the Bible does sanction natural theology and that one can make no rigid distinction between biblical revelation and natural theology.

To begin with (Chapter 1), he focuses on the famous debate on natural theology between Barth and Emil Brunner. He also touches on Barth's Gifford Lectures of 1937-8. Here (and later in the book) he shows that Barth was quite wrong in grounding his critique of natural theology on principles of Reformation theology. Neither Luther nor Calvin were inimically hostile to natural theology. Quite the contrary. Barr also exposes the absurdity of what Barth said about natural theology in justifying his giving of the Gifford Lectures (which are supposed to be devoted to natural theology). Barth's Gifford Lectures ignored natural theology on the ground that it did not exist. Barr well highlights the casuistry involved in this line of reasoning. He also emphasizes an

interesting connection between Barth's critique of natural theology and the rising Nazi Movement in Germany. "Start along the line of natural theology, he [Barth] thought, and sooner or later you will end up with something like the 'German Christian' (DC) movement. The DC ideas that nation or race or culture were in-built structures of humanity and that religion must accommodate itself to them were, as Barth saw it, the logical result of the long compromise with natural theology" (pp.10 f.). As Barr goes on to show in Chapter 6, this was an absurd argument which provided no serious grounds for rejecting natural theology and which backfired on Barth because his reading of Scripture was so evidently dependent on non-Scriptural considerations.

But Barth made vigorous attempts with reference to the Bible to defend the idea that there is no such thing as natural theology. We may therefore ask how opposed the Bible is to natural theology. This is Barr's concern from the end of Chapter 1. Chapters 2-5 are a detailed consideration of various biblical passages (e.g. *Acts 17* and *Romans 1*) which some regard as accepting the possibility of natural theology but which Barth and others have interpreted differently (Barr also discusses post-Old Testament Jewish writings, principally *The Wisdom of Solomon*). The verdict of these chapters is that biblical authors clearly favour or presuppose some kind of natural theology. And in subsequent chapters Barr gives many other reasons for seeing in Scripture an indebtedness to or an acceptance of natural theology. In Chapter 7, for example, he argues that we cannot draw a sharp distinction between the biblical portrait of God and the 'theism' associated with exponents of natural theology. Also in Chapter 7 he argues that Old Testament teaching about God itself depends on prior religious belief which can be thought of as 'natural' to those who held it. In Chapter 9 he makes effective use of the rabbinic expression "the Torah spoke as [or: in] the language of the sons of men" to indicate how Old Testament talk of God cannot be thought of as something which presupposes no human ways of thinking. How do you make sense when talking of God unless what you say has some sense apart from talk of God?

Catholic authors have, of course (and in their different ways), been saying for centuries much that Barr is now vigorously affirming. Barr does not document their thinking, and he entirely ignores the writings of twentieth century Catholics who say what he says. This is a general weakness of the book, especially notable in Chapter 6 ("A Return to the Modern Discussion"). Some twentieth century Catholic authors have been saying what Barr says with Barth explicitly in mind. Here I think especially of Henri Bouillard, who should surely have rated a mention by Barr. So, at one level, Barr is not offering anything new. He is defending an ancient tradition (he is also repeating some of what he has already said in books like *The Semantics of Biblical Language*). But it is significant that a contemporary non-Catholic author who is a much respected biblical scholar can now be writing on natural theology as Barr does. For few such scholars do this. And it is significant that Barr can

defend his theses as cogently and as entertainingly as he does. Anyone who holds (as I do) that biblical scholars are often weak on argument will have to exempt Barr from their judgement. The exegetical chapters of his book are solidly reasoned. With respect to the issue of natural theology they are manifestly right. Barr has shown quite clearly why natural theology is something accepted by biblical authors. There can be no going back on this issue.

But what is implied by Barr's findings? As Barr shows very well, one implication is that the whole Barthian system is impossible since it stands or falls with the rejection of natural theology offered in the name of biblical revelation. Again and again Barr returns to Barth to emphasize the errors and inconsistencies in his writing. And, though it might be deemed to suffer from 'overkill', Barr's critique of Barth is thoroughly convincing.

Yet readers who never thought much of Barth on natural theology in the first place might raise questions which Barr does not really go into. On reading his book, the question which most strikes me is "Can we make any distinction between natural theology and revelation?". From what Barr says, I am uncertain what his views on the matter are exactly. But he does seem to come close to saying that there is no real distinction here. On p.195, for instance, he observes that "there is no absolute distinction between revelation and natural theology". He continues: "Revelation is not a completely separate body of information or channel of material, totally different in substance from what is publicly known or publicly accessible knowledge. Revelation, if we must still use the word, is not a completely separate entity but is a mode in which things already known are seen in a quite new way, and also a mode in which things previously unknown are added to things already known, making a different pattern but including many elements that were the object of anterior knowledge". These remarks are, I suppose, subject to a benign interpretation, especially given the whole of Barr's text. Perhaps they are only saying that the Bible cannot be deemed to be "revelation" as opposed to "natural theology". But we have good reason to say that much that has been taught as revelation cannot be something known, and cannot be derived from what we do know. Hence the traditional (Thomistic) distinction between faith and knowledge. Had Barr been less concerned than he is with Protestant authors, maybe he would have had some interesting things to say about this matter. As things stand, he has done an excellent job at discussing the role of natural theology within the Bible, and he has done a brilliant hatchet-job on Barth, but he has done little to show what is the role of natural theology in theological thinking in general. He has shown that it must be deemed of import by theologians who wish to appeal to the authority of Scripture. But I do not think he has done much more than that. Yet since 'that' is quite an achievement, I am not really complaining very much. *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* is a splendid book. It contains much more of value than I can convey in the space of a review. So the basic message is: buy the book and learn from it.

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