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The Competence and Responsibility of Natural Theology

Abstract

The present article attempts to define the parameters of competency of natural theology and the ways this theological information may be applied. The author demonstrates the fact that the natural knowledge of God, the prototype of this branch of theology, is the invariable basis and starting point of religious consciousness. In order to better understand this fact, the antithesis of this principle is examined in the work of Kant and Barth both of whom sought to destroy the basis of natural theology proceeding respectively from a philosophical and a theological standpoint.

Keywords

Natural theology, natural cognition of God, natural religion, transcendental theology, revelation, analogia entis.



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Natural theology is the expression introduced into scientific use during Middle Ages. It appeared in the titles

of the treaties of Nicolas Bonetus and Raymund Sabounde at the crest of the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. Nevertheless traces of natural theology can be traced to much earlier times. In reality the idea that stays beyond the expression *natural theology* seems to be contemporary to the theological experience of humanity. Normal impetus of creation at the moment when it is just created consists in the longing to praise and render thanks to its Creator. The religious experience of Old Testament supposed the possibilities of knowledge of God attained through the created world. Psalm 18:2: *The heavens will preach glory of God and about the done of his hands speaks the earth*. Generally we can say that the understanding of God as the Creator of the world is inherent to the religious experience of humanity. It's a point of departure in the theology of Orthodox Liturgy as well as in universal dogmatic consciousness of all Christians. For example the *anaphora* in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom contains the following words: "It's worthy and righteous to chant You, to bless You, to praise You, to thank You... For the reason that You introduced us from non-existence to being". Another example: Niceo-Constantinopolitan Creed encloses a dogmatic confession of faith in its first paragraph : "I believe in single God, the Father Pantocrator, Creator of heaven and earth...". All these facts are quite clear for the reason that the creation of the world is the first beneficence of God in his attitude to humanity and that's why the dogmatic and sacramental reflection about God as a Creator is a necessary and principal root of theological consciousness of Christianity.

However the insufficiency of natural theology was evident in the ancient Christian times in case when a religious person limited his knowledge by the frame of understandable things in the created world and when natural religiousness ceased to follow its predestination that may be formulated as a claim to be theology. St Apostle Paul warns against that danger when he says about the pagans that have limited knowledge about divine things but who accepted accessible limited knowledge

for a final and perfect knowledge and therefore inclined to idolatry. In the Epistle to Galatians he writes:

Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things... Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. (Rom 1:19–25).

The ancient Christian theologians who justified the legitimacy of natural cognition and natural theology have noted well-known limitedness of that kind of knowledge about God. They also spoke about the necessity of other sources and ways for comprehending God. Among others Hilarius of Pittavius who can be regarded as a representative of integrity of Christian theological world of the first millennium — of Latin as well as of Greek — has said: “If a human spirit would not receive the grace of the Holy Spirit, it could achieve some knowledge of Divine nature, but would not reach the light of cognition”¹. His thought is very simple: natural theology is not cancelled but amplified with gifts of the Divine Revelation, or to say more strictly, reaches its fulfillment in the Divine Revelation. Without taking the testimony of the Divine Revelation into account natural theology and natural cognition of God lose all their meaning and all positive sense.

The actuality of our congress is conditioned by the challenge that the present world situation throws down not only to

¹ Hilarius. *De Trinitate* II. 35.

humanities but especially to theological sciences. As far as I see the theological understanding of events in our world presupposes a solid clarification of the principles of that kind of theologizing. I mean natural theology, understood as some views and reflections about God founded on the base of immediate perception of facts and ideas in the created world, and therefore facts and thoughts accessible to our direct comprehension. Natural witness in the theological tradition of Christianity was always one of the most important apologetic arguments. And that's why the clarification of its structure and purpose should satisfy not only the person initiated into theological subtleties but also anybody who is far from them. That's why in my contribution I would like to propose an essay in reflection about the inner character of natural theology, about the sphere of its competence as well as about its purpose that it ought to follow.

Criticism by Kant

Natural theology in its history more than once met with grand doubts in its validity and in its rights to exist. Suffice it to mention two perhaps the most impressive attempts to depose and turn down natural theology as a method of cognition and statement about God. The first endeavor belongs to Immanuel Kant. The second one – to Karl Barth. It's interesting to note that their initial motives for criticism are diametrically different from each other. Kant criticizes natural theology from below, from the positions of philosophizing mind, from the point of view of epistemology (theory of knowledge), conditioned by the demands of empirical validity. Barth criticizes natural theology from above, from the positions of biblical Message accepted as a single and unconditioned source for any kind of true knowledge about God that means from the point of view of Revelation. The detection of motives in the criticisms of Kant and Barth may give us more clearly inner counters and external outlines of natural theology and therefore can help us to formulate the

boundaries of competence and responsibility of that kind of theological knowledge.

It's important to mention that in the interpretation of Kant the definition of theology as such bears a principle character. According to him theology is "a comprehension of the primary substance". That's why it is formed like some kind of construction; its composing elements are borrowed from the store of concepts available for the cognizing person. This understanding of theology corresponds well to the basic epistemological system of Kantian philosophy that first of all looks for the possibilities and conditions of cognition. This understanding of theology as a comprehension of the primary substance of course extends also to natural theology. Kant estimates the question about the sources of theological knowledge in two aspects: a source within us, that means for Kant – in the bounds of just only reason; and a source outside of us, that is called Revelation. The legitimacy of the second type of knowledge is putted in the question by the whole context of the 'First Criticism' by Kant. Theological knowledge derived from the Revelation presupposes an illegitimate assumption that does not correspond to the condition of *a priori* knowledge and therefore does not possess necessary apodicticity. According to Kant that kind of knowledge about God is closed for us.

Between these two types of cognition of the primary substance – from the reason and from the Revelation – some intermediate type is situated: "by means of a conception derived from the nature of our own mind, as a supreme intelligence". That type is called by Kant «natural theology». He describes the mechanism of acquiring of theological knowledge in natural theology as follows: "Natural theology infers the attributes and the existence of an author of the world, from the constitution of, the order and unity observable in, the world, in which two modes of causality must be admitted to exist – those of nature and freedom. Thus it rises from this world to a supreme intelligence, either as the principle of all natural, or of all moral

order and perfection. In the former case it is termed physico-theology, in the latter, ethical or moral-theology². The key phrase of that passage is worthy of a special grammatical analysis: «(natural theology) rises from this world to a supreme intelligence». The predicate rises is speaking for itself: the logic of intellectual process in the natural theology is understood as an active ascending from the well-known to the unknown, that for Kant is equal to the way from definite to probable, from the light of mind to the darkness of ignorance.

Thus Kant corresponds the natural theology with the *physico-theological argument* for the existence of Divine Being³, or by the other words with deduction of theological character on the base of notion derived from the created world. His conclusion is as follows: “Physico-theology is therefore incapable of presenting a determinate conception of a supreme cause of the world, and is therefore insufficient as a principle of theology—a theology which is itself to be the basis of religion”. Kant criticizes the claims of natural theology to attain some positive data about God first of all for the reason of illegitimate transition from empirical to transcendent that is presupposed during the comprehension of God as a Creator of the world and humanity.

Kant gives the preference for the first type of theological knowledge – comprehension of the primal substance by the mind, that he designates as *transcendental theology*. This theology views its subject – the primal substance – «by means of pure transcendental conceptions», that are imminent to the nature of human rationality. This type of theological comprehension manages without any intermediary and gives the most immediate and therefore adequate theological knowledge. That kind of knowledge develops from the mind a rational conception of the primal substance that is in reality prompted by the nature of cognizing person. There is no place

² Kant I. *Critique of Pure Reason*. I. 2. 3. 7.

³ Ibid. I. 2. 3. 6.

here for any ambiguity that supplied by Revelation. Everything here is well defined and geometrically transparent.

It seems that from the field of Kant's view in his criticism of natural theology one very important trait of that kind of theological knowledge is dropped out, the trait that on the one hand puts considerable limitations over natural theology, and on the other – liberates it from heavy load of responsibility transposed on the theology of revelation. The comprehension of God the Creator gives us only indirect, auxiliary and supplementary knowledge about God. And that fact was well understood by all pensive theologians of Christian Antiquity and Middle Ages. As for Kant, he obviously overestimates the claims of natural theology and therefore he denies its rights for existence.

From the historical point of view the course of Kant's thoughts is well understood if one turns to the heated discussions that took place during all XVIIIth century between philosophers of Enlightenment and Christian apologists. The problem of the true religion was in question. As it became evident the main subject was the significance and sense of natural religion in one or another system of thought. The inner logic of that question can be well defined as follows: there are two premises: the first one—natural religion is the point of departure for the construction of religious system, in that case religious system obtains secondary deductive character because it is constructed on the basis of different propositions of secondary natural religious experience; the second one: natural religion is only a derivative of the more profound religious experience, called *positive religion*, or in other words, of religion based on positive data of Revelation, that kind of religion can be classified as primary, because here the secondary religious experience is only the supplementary confirmation. Both theologians and philosophers of the epoch of Enlightenment preferred to work in the first way, according to which natural religion and natural theology in their turn work as a point of departure for constructing a religious system and theological knowledge.

That fact ensured the unconditional capitulation for the Christian apologists of that time, who lost from their field of view the unshakeable stronghold of revealed knowledge; and at the same time it assured absolute triumph for the independent philosophers, who constructed with great success various quasi-religious systems that however turned out to be very short-lived.

Criticism by Barth

With the same bitterness the controversy about natural theology broke out in the XXth century. Karl Barth has deployed his attack on it from the other side. I have named his criticism as a criticism from above – from the stand of Biblical Revelation. He leans on one of the most important theological principles of Protestantism – *sola Scriptura*. His ideological adversary Emil Brunner presents Barth's view in the follow words: "As far as we admit the revelation in Scripture as a unique norm of our knowledge of God and as a unique source of our salvation we must categorically decline every attempt to state the existence of *common revelation* of God in nature, in conscience and in history. There is no reason at all to acknowledge any revelation of two kinds — common and individual. There exists only one revelation, namely the single perfect revelation in Christ"⁴.

Natural theology for Barth became nearly the chief subject for discussion with the liberal theology, with which he had radically broken off soon after the First World War. He saw in it some kind of *anthropologizing* of theology that has been already stated in the phenomenon of religion by Feuerbach: "A man installs such kind of God that is none else than his own reflection, personification of his own theology". That was the

⁴ Brunner E., *Natur und Gnade*, „Dialektische theologie“ in *Scheidung und Bewahrung*, 1933–1936; W. Furst, Hrsg. *Theologische Bibliothek*. Bd. 34. München, 1966. S. 282.

position of liberal theology of XIX – XX centuries, namely the anthropocentrism that was treated by Barth as a sinful human self-affirmation that brought Christian Europe to the world catastrophe. To that principle Barth opposed his own theological program, with a little bit of tautology named by him *A theology of God*. The other although not so evident adversary of Barth was the Catholic theology of the First Vatican Council, that has legalized on the official level the competences of natural theology and has formulated a doctrine of twofold mode of God cognition⁵.

The attacks of Barth against the natural theology are sometimes extremely emotional. Thus the main method of natural theology introduced as far back as by Thomas – *analogia entis* – is named by Barth *an invention of Antichrist*⁶.

The same ideas but somewhat milder Barth expresses in his *Essays in Dogmatics*, the cycle of lectures that were read during summer 1946 in Bonne destroyed during the Second World War: “We should not bind the matter of Church with that or another world-view... because it presupposes a philosophic-metaphysical conception of human person”⁷. Here a very important idea not only for Barth but also for many generations of Christian theologians is enclosed. Analyzing morphology of German word *Weltanschauung* Barth insists on the fact that Christianity is free from any kind of world-view, it cannot bind its above-historical vocation with any transient views on the changeable and unstable world.

⁵ Denzinger H. (1795): Hoc quoque perpetuus Ecclesiae catholicae consensus tenuit et tenet, duplicem esse ordinem cognitionis non solum principio, sed obiecto etiam distinctum : principio quidem, quia altero naturali ratione et altero fide divina cognoscimus; obiecto autem, quia praeter ea, ad quae naturalis ratio pertingere potest, credenda nobis proponitur mysteria in Deo abscondita, quae, nisi revelata divinitus, innotescere non possunt.

⁶ Barth K. KD I/1, preface.

⁷ Quoted according to publication of translation into Russian — *Барт К. Очерк догматики* / Пер. Ю.А. Кимелева. СПб.: Алетейя, 2000. С. 99.

Barth's radicalism in his asserting of the single truth of the Evangelic Message forces him to break off with any kind of connections that bound human person with God in this world. These ties may be arranged only through the introduction to the eternal life, to the Kingdom of God. By other words, threads that connect us with Divine World may be thrown only from there, and in this world we cannot find them. The Divine Revelation is the only thing that gives us true understanding and knowledge of created nature. That's why we need to distinguish very attentively the Christian faith and the world-view, understood as a systematically expressed assemblage of our views about the world, man and history.

In its motives the criticisms of natural theology from below, from the position of cognition proposed by Kant, and from above, from the position of Revelation proposed by Barth contain some right arguments. But at the same time neither Kant nor Barth took into account the simple fact, that correct natural theology has never pretended to be self-sufficient, to the same degree that was incriminated to it by both of them. Both thinkers seemed not to take into account the inner character of natural theology, blaming it with the claim to be a type of cognition, whereas in the Christian theological tradition it was always only a type of interpretation. That's why the criticisms of Kant and Barth may be accepted only with great reservations. From my point of view the natural theology is not the theological epistemology but only a hermeneutical method that is enclosed in the bigger theological doctrine and serves only as its supporter.

That's why Brunner is absolutely right when he insists on the fact that only a Christian is capable of competent and adequate natural theology. And as a hermeneutical type of science natural theology presupposes an existence, before any comprehension, of some kind of preliminary theological knowledge, of so to say *transcendental theological concept*. Here one can only bear in mind the warning of St Apostle Paul about the pagans who, although having some dim notion about God

founded on the deductive search of truth, did not cognize it and lost their way.

Apologies of Natural Theology

The wide attack of Barth on the natural theology was resisted by theologians from protestant camp as well as from catholic camp. For example the former friend of Barth Emil Brunner and Catholic theologian Henri Bouillard. Both made necessary elaborations for a due understanding of natural theology on the one hand by eliminating the extremities in interpretations of the opponents of natural theology, and on the other—by admitting everything valuable in their argument.

Brunner affirms that “only a Christian possesses the true natural cognition of God, namely the person that at the same time stays in the fold of Revelation of Christ⁸. Ipso facto he shares the view of Barth that there is no true perception of Divine Revelation out of Christianity, but at the same time Brunner insists that the ways of spreading the Divine Word to a human person are far more various than it seemed to Barth. Brunner makes an important differentiation between subjective-human and objective-divine factors. The objective-divine is absolutely infallible. An aberration is possible only in subjective-human that sometimes screens the divine. We must set up an agreement between these two factors. In other case we face the situation described by St Paul: *Because that, when they (pagans. – P.M.) knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things* (Rom 1:21–23).

⁸ Brunner E., *Natur und Gnade...* S. 290.

In reality natural theology contain in itself some kind of *hermeneutical theological cycle*, according to which understanding of concrete particular (in our case content of natural theology) is impossible without understanding of common (knowledge derived from Revelation). The particular is cognition of the world as a created objectivity and common is a theological significance of being, manifested in the Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. It seems to me that Barth would have agreed with this interpretation. That's why answering the question raised in the title of my paper – concerning the sphere of competence and responsibility of natural theology – I must say the following: natural theology works as a supplementary type of theological cognition, knowledge and expression. The field of its responsibility is limited by elevation of all kind of positive knowledge about the world and itself accessible to humanity to the single source and single aim of every kind of being. One of the deepest intuition of Christian theology is an understanding of profound significance of Divine Revelation expressed in the Gospels is that God speaks here not only about God but also about humans and created world. And without that human dimension the Divine Revelation loses fullness of its meaning. Symmetrically to it the most profound sense of natural theology lies in the fact that the world gives witness not only about itself but also about its Creator. And in that theological understanding of the universe the clue to the being of the world is to be found, half-open to us through the Divine Being.