

Journal of Biblical Apologetics

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Front Cover Art as described by Francis A. Schaeffer

“The Renaissance is normally dated at the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries, but to understand it we must look at events which led up to this, especially its philosophical antecedents during the Middle Ages. And that means considering in a bit more detail the thought of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Aquinas was a Dominican. He studied at the universities of Naples and Paris, and later he taught in Paris. He was the outstanding theologian of his day and his thinking is still dominant in some circles of the Roman Catholic Church. Aquinas’s contribution to Western thought is, of course, much richer than we can discuss here, but his view of man demands our attention. Aquinas held that man had revolted against God and thus was fallen, but Aquinas had an incomplete view of the Fall. He thought that the Fall did not affect man as a whole but only in part. In his view the will was fallen or corrupted but the intellect was not affected. Thus people could rely on their own human wisdom, and this meant that people were free to mix the teachings of the Bible with the teachings of the non-Christian philosophers.

Among the Greek philosophers, Thomas Aquinas relied especially on one of the greatest, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.). In 1263 Pope Urban IV had forbidden the study of Aristotle in the universities. Aquinas managed to have Aristotle accepted, so the ancient non-Christian philosophy was reenthroned.

To understand what result this had, it is worthwhile to look at Raphael’s (1483–1520) painting *The School of Athens* (c. 1510) to comprehend some of the discussions and influences which followed in the Renaissance period. The fresco is in the Vatican. In *The School of Athens* Raphael painted Plato with one finger pointed upward, which means that he pointed toward absolutes or ideals. In contrast, he pictured Aristotle with his fingers spread wide and thrust down toward the earth, which means that he emphasized particulars. By particulars we mean the individual things which are about us; a chair is a particular, as is each molecule which makes up the chair, and so on. The individual person is also a particular and thus you are a particular. Thomas Aquinas brought this Aristotelian emphasis on individual things—the particulars—into the philosophy of the late Middle Ages, and this set the stage for the humanistic elements of the Renaissance and the basic problem they created.”

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Introduction to Journal of Biblical Apologetics Is Natural Theology Fideistic? By Dr. Robert A. Morey

The question posed above may be shocking to some Evangelicals. It may even be viewed as outrageous to ask such questions. The typical smug response is:

“Why, everyone is into natural theology today. Our favorite apologists are all supporters of it. In countless radio shows, seminars, books, and tapes we are challenged to choose between “faith or reason.” And, who would be so stupid as to choose faith over reason? To choose faith instead of reason would mean that Christianity is based on ignorance and a blind leap of faith. Thus all intelligent Christians are agreed that Reason is the basis of Christianity.”

Of course, the issue is NOT between man's “reason or faith” but between “reason or Revelation.” The humanistic apologist begins and ends *a priori* with some aspect of fallen *man* as the Origin of truth. Thus he assumes that we must choose between *man's* reason, *man's* emotions, *man's* faith or *man's* experience. “God” is not on the humanist menu.

Professing Christians who are humanistic apologists and philosophers are fideists in the classical sense of starting from blind faith. They have blind faith in human Reason as the Origin of truth, justice, morals, and beauty. If you challenge their faith in human Reason as the measure of all things including God, they end up arguing in circles.

Christian Humanist: Through human reason we can demonstrate the truth about the existence and attributes of God. Such issues as evil, time, and eternity can be answered apart from and independent of the Bible. Man can use his reason to figure out theology and philosophy.

Christian Theist: You must have a lot of faith in human reason to make such assertions. What is the basis of your faith in human reason? On what grounds do you believe in human autonomy? Isn't your faith a “leap in the dark?”

Christian Humanist: Are you accusing me of being a fideist? Reason, not faith, is the basis of truth! People like Van Til, Schaeffer, Clark, Frame, Morey, etc. are fideists. Not me.

Christian Theist: What is a fideist?

Christian Humanist: Oh, that is a dirty word in philosophy and theology. It refers to those who are ignorant of philosophy and who view their faith as the basis of what they believe. Most uneducated Christians are guilty of it.

Christian Theist: But don't you have *faith* in human reason and in human autonomy? Don't you *believe* in starting from man, not from God? Thus you base your theology and philosophy on *faith in yourself*?

Christian Humanist: Well, of course I do. All great philosophers and theologians believe in natural theology. They all began with themselves. Haven't you read Plato, Aristotle or Aquinas?

Christian Theist: Oh, I see that your faith is based on *Argumentum ad Populum*. A philosopher or theologian is "great" only if he is humanistic? Aren't you stacking the deck? Aren't you appealing to the authority of pagan philosophers?

Christian Humanist: Reason tells us that reason is the Origin. Get with the program.

Christian Theist: Ah, so we arrive at last at your fideism. You believe in reason because reason tells you to.

Christian Humanist: How dare you charge me with fideism!

Christian Theist: Look, you believe in "reason" because "reason" tells you to believe in it. Isn't that circular reasoning? You appealed to the gallery and to the authority of pagan philosophers. Your faith in reason is thus irrational and a leap of faith on your part. How is it that you can appeal to the uninspired authority of Aristotle or Aquinas and, yet, if I appeal to the inspired authority of Paul or Isaiah, you would decry my appeal as fideism?

Christian Humanist: This is not how the game is played! Are you saying that you start from God's Revelation instead of man's reason or faith?

Christian Theist: Yes! By George, I think he's got it.

Christian Humanist: But, if you begin with God and his Word instead of with man and his reason, this would make us slaves to the Bible. In order for man to be truly free, he must be free from God and the Bible.

Christian Theist: What you just said is what Satan told Adam and Eve in the Garden:

"You must break free from God's Word. Make up your own mind what is right and wrong, true and false. If you must choose between what God says and what you think, go with your own reason."

I prefer what Paul said, "Let God be true even if this means every man is a liar." The biblical apologist begins with God's Revelation in Scripture. It is more reliable than even first-hand eyewitness accounts according to [2 Peter 1:16–21](#). When someone states that the issue is between "reason or faith," he has been brainwashed by humanism. The issue is between God or man, i.e. God's Revelation or man's reason, experience, emotions or faith.

Christian Humanist: That is absurd. We all have to begin with ourselves, our own ideas, and our own reasoning abilities.

Christian Theist: Don't use the fallacy of equivocation on me. By "begin with" or "start from," I mean that God's Word is the ultimate Judge or Origin of truth and morals. We all use our reasoning abilities every day. Being rational and being a "Rationalist" are two different things.

Christian Humanist: But we must begin, not with the Bible, but with general revelation found in nature. Look in [Rom. 1](#) and [Psa. 19](#). Read it and weep!

Christian Theist: My friend, can't you see you have just refuted yourself?

Christian Humanist: How?

Christian Theist: To prove that we should not begin with the Bible—you begin with the Bible? To justify not starting from Scripture - you start by quoting it! You just slit your own throat. Indeed, without the Bible, you would not even have the idea of general revelation. When you run around trying to prove the existence and nature of God from reason alone, what "God" are you talking about?

Christian Humanist: What do you mean, "What God?"

Christian Theist: Are you trying to prove the existence of the "God" of the Qur'an, the Vedas, the Book of Mormon, the Divine Principle?

Christian Humanist: Duh! I am referring to the God of the Bible, not the God of the Vedas or the Qur'an.

Christian Theist: Once again you start with the Bible and you begin with the God who revealed Himself in it. You have been so saturated with *biblical* ideas of God, man, sin, creation, revelation, etc. that you are *incapable* of starting without the Bible. The only ones who can truly start from their own reason apart from the Bible are the heathen who never heard of the Bible or any of the religions which refer to it. Such a person must be in *total isolation* from Judaism and Christianity, and any religions that borrowed material from those religions. When we look in history to see what isolated heathens have deduced from nature using their reason, we find nothing but gross idolatry and immorality. *Thus natural theology is a complete bust.* It has never worked in the past and it will never work in the future. It is unlikely you will ever meet someone who has been *totally isolated* from the Bible. The "heathen" today are generally those who have heard the Word but reject it.

Christian Humanist: You mean I cannot be objective and neutral in using reason alone to find God because all those words and concepts have a *biblical* meaning?

Christian Theist: Yes. Those apologists and philosophers who do not admit this are either ignorant or deceptive. If you are a Christian, you **cannot** free yourself from all the ways the Bible has influenced your thinking. *It is impossible for you to begin with yourself apart from the Bible when your "self" has already been influenced by the Bible.*

The assumption that theology, philosophy, and apologetics can be derived from human Reason apart from special Revelation needs to be examined carefully because many of those who were the loudest supporters of it in the last 25 years have, by and large, become apostate. The forbidden fruit of natural theology has proven to be very poisonous indeed.

Clark Pinnock is a good example of this ugly reality. He began as an ardent defender of the inerrancy of Scripture. We remember with fondness his lectures and books in support of *Sola Scriptura*.

Beginning in the 70's, there was an epistemological revolution in Pinnock's thinking and he became a great supporter of natural theology. In the end, he joined the Communist Party in Canada, denied the omniscience, omnipotence and sovereignty of God, attacked the eternal conscious punishment of unbelievers in hell, rejected the doctrine of original sin, questioned the Pauline authorship of Ephesians and that Daniel wrote Daniel, and finally denied that it was necessary to hear of and believe in Jesus Christ to be saved. Each time he betrayed a biblical truth, he did so in the name of "Reason."

Pinnock is only one of a very long line of neo-Evangelicals in the later half of the 20th century who have betrayed Christ. Some of my seminary professors and fellow theological students who started out in the Faith came to despise it. Franky Schaeffer's apostasy grieved us deeply. Almost without exception, the slippery slope to apostasy began when they abandoned *Sola Scriptura* and adopted *sola ratiōne*.

Once they made the blind leap of faith that man can discover the existence, nature and attributes of God by human Reason apart from the special Revelation found in Scripture, they developed "natural" apologetics based on human Reason. *Man was now the measure of all things including God!*

From natural apologetics, they slid down the slope to the idea that if man can know God apart from the Bible, then he can make it to heaven without the Bible. If the Bible is not needed, then repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ are not needed either. Thus the heathen are not lost. They do not need to hear of or believe in the gospel. *Natural theology inevitably leads to natural salvation.*

Of course, there are a few natural theologians who, at this time, are still orthodox to some extent. Residual pietism left over from their evangelical phase emotionally prevents them from sliding all the way down the slope. But their students do not have any pietism to hold them in check. Those who sow the seeds of natural theology frequently see their students reap the whirlwind of apostasy.

The Roman Catholic Church was led into natural theology by the heretical Thomas Aquinas. It was officially adopted at Vatican I and is very visible in the New Catholic Catechism. Why some Protestants choose *sola ratiōne* over *Sola Scriptura* can be traced to various philosophical, moral, and psychological causes, none of which are noble.

The first edition of the Journal of Biblical Apologetics will examine the origin, nature, and defects of natural theology and issue a clarion call to return to our biblical roots and Evangelical heritage.

Dr. Robert A. Morey
Editor

Greek Origins of Natural Theology

By Dr. Robert K. McGregor Wright, ThM, PhD.

Preamble

Christian Apologetics has always recognized that God has spoken not only in his verbal revelation now contained in the Scriptures, but also through the natural phenomena and structure of the Creation. This is made clear in such passages as [Psalms 8 and 19](#), and in [Romans 1](#) and [Acts 14 and 17](#), and is implied on many other occasions.

The controversy continues however, as to *whether the apologist should argue for the existence and attributes of God by starting from the empirical properties of the Creation without referring first to the inscripturated portion of revelation*. For Reformed thinkers, this is the essence of the question. Can God's existence and attributes be probatively demonstrated by rational proofs *derived from nature alone*? Or should we first *presuppose* the existence of the God of the biblical revelation, and only then interpret his Creation in terms of his own prior interpretation found in special revelation? Is it possible to prove the existence of God without reference to the Bible, or is this project impossible and therefore a strategic mistake for the Christian apologist?

The purpose of this article is to show that not only does the Bible contain no encouragement to the Christian apologist to develop a "natural theology" independently from Scripture, but that in fact such a project is a reversion from the biblical world-view, in the direction of pagan philosophy. The entire project is a pre-Christian phenomenon in Greek philosophy, and only entered the early church's theology after other compromises with non-Christian thought had prepared the way for such efforts. In fact, it is not only invalid as a method, but is also incompatible with the Bible's view of the knowledge of God.

The issue here is not whether God reveals himself through the creation (usually referred to as "general revelation") or not, but whether "evidences" as traditionally developed from facts or reason, should be made the *basis* of theistic proofs constructed *apart from the consideration of special revelation*. Nor does a skeptical attitude to the traditional theistic proofs have any bearing on the validity of the so-called "transcendental proof" developed recently by reformed presuppositionalists (Bahnsen, Frame, etc.)

The Tradition Of Natural Theology

Natural theology was established as a legitimate phase of Catholic thought by the early church Fathers, but was not given its most definitive formulation until Thomas Aquinas. It was Aquinas who effectively settled the question for western Catholicism and for much of traditional Protestantism thereafter, including such modern evangelical apologists as Norman Geisler. Systematic discussions of this question therefore habitually begin with a consideration of St. Thomas' famous formulation of the "five ways" of proving God's existence by looking at nature. To this was traditionally added the "ontological argument" as presented by Anselm of Canterbury. Later analysts further reduced the five ways to three, because some of Aquinas'

formulations turned out to be just different versions of what came to be called the “cosmological” argument from causation or contingency.

Traditional natural theology has therefore usually fielded four types of argument intended to prove God’s existence by starting with the Creation. They have been called the *ontological*, the *cosmological*, the *moral* and the *teleological* arguments. They correspond roughly to the classical division of Greek philosophy into the four central issues of Being, Knowing, Ethics, and Purpose, and they have been related to Aristotle’s four “causes,” distinguished as the material, the formal, the efficient, and the final cause. Also, modern systems theory tells us that any working system minimally requires four “components,” the material, the informational, and the intentional components, plus a more elusive something called “expertise.” In order to function, the system called a computer on the desk before me requires a material structure made of metal and glass and plastic, while the informational component is built into it by the original designers and the programmers of the software. Then, it would not be a “computer” rather than a “TV” unless it had been manufactured according to a purpose or end intended by the designers. The expertise (such as it is) is supplied by my poking at the keyboard to express a certain set of choices which in turn prompt a particular result in the printing of these words on the screen. Through the keyboard I can manipulate the program to select pertinent information. Without all four of these components there would be no computer, no working “system,” and so this essay would have to be composed some other way. Similarly, the world as a whole may be thought of as a system with the same set of components.

By observing these components, we can make inferences about the *makers* of the computer. Likewise, natural theology invites us to look at the four similar components of the world considered as a whole, and to draw conclusions about its *Maker*. Hence, the traditional Theistic Proofs take their departure from the Being, the Information, the Morality, and the Design of the world. It is also argued that the analogous nature of human knowledge about God does not alter the relevance of the four major theistic proofs.

The reader must go elsewhere for a demonstration that either the theistic proofs are all logically invalid (the “inferences” and “conclusions” just mentioned do not validly follow from the premises), or that even if formally valid, the conclusions they yield are not the God of the Bible (*cf.* Aristotle’s prime mover). Our purpose here is limited to showing where they *came from*, and that this point of origin was not the Bible itself, but the surrounding Greek intellectual culture.

The tradition of beginning an apologetic program with natural theology and then adding special (or *supernatural*) theology as a kind of supplement, was described by Catholic theologians in the famous saying that “Grace does not destroy Nature, but only completes it.” By this they meant that the lower realm of Nature is autonomously intelligible to us in terms of itself, while our understanding of the higher realm of Grace must come from God’s revelation. Nature can be understood to yield its own *science* without prior dependence on the *faith* described in verbal revelation (such as we find in the Bible), so that we must first derive our *natural* knowledge of God from the Creation (such as that God is there, wise, omnipotent, and good), before adding *saving* knowledge to it (he is also an eternal Trinity of Persons), by the Church’s authority. In other words, Grace comes to Nature rather like a religious icing on a secular cake.

Framing the topic this way originated in the first place from acceptance of Aristotle’s famous disjunction between “believing” and “knowing.” For Aristotle, real knowledge was initially empirical, and this kind of knowing was treated as not only available to the autonomous human

consciousness naturally, but was strictly objective. “Knowing” was based empirically on our experience of Facts, while “believing” was what you did when you didn’t really “know,” that is, when you had no empirical basis for what you believed. Accordingly, the “realm of faith,” which the Thomists labeled Grace, was clearly distinct from the “realm of science,” which the Thomists called Nature. With this statement, we are home already with the scientific prejudice of the twentieth century, in which people of science are those who *know*, while people of faith merely *believe*.

From then on, the big question for Catholic thought becomes how to relate the realm of Nature to the realm of Grace. It could even be argued that this is still the central project of Catholic apologetics. The usual way of doing this is to show that we can start with what we can know naturally, and then *supplement* this natural theology with the added bonus of supernatural revelation from the realm of Grace. Since grace and revelation (and salvation mediated through the sacraments) come from God, the realm of Grace is above (Lat. *superior*), the realm of Nature on the hierarchically-ordered great chain of Being. That is, Grace is *supernatural* (above Nature). Accordingly, the realm of Nature is subject to the higher realm, being lower or beneath it (Lat. *inferior*), which meant that Theology was Queen of the sciences. At least, that was how they saw the world in the Middle Ages. The Nature-Grace dichotomy provided a motif, which structured such problems as the relation of faith to science, of the sacraments to the lay life, and even of church to state.

Fundamental Assumptions Of Natural Theology

Aristotle taught *an autonomist free will*, and bequeathed this view of human nature to the Stoic school that he inspired. Of course, he had no conception of a Fall affecting the whole of our nature, but simply assumed that the will could autonomously choose either way for or against anything presented to it by the intellect. In other words, Aristotle taught that God as the prime mover of natural motion (Gk., the *PROTON KINOUN* or Lat., *primum mobile*), could be known by an autonomous intellectual process essentially the same as other types of empirical knowing. He had no concept of the “realm of Grace” later developed by Catholic theologians in the Middle Ages.

Natural theology accepts this autonomy of the natural intellect as axiomatic, and further assumes with Strato of Lampsacus that the universe can be made intelligible in terms of itself. Then, from what we already know of the world, God can be deduced as a first cause, as a necessary being, as an origin of moral meaning, or as a great designer. Considering what the Bible says about *knowledge* and *wisdom* and *instruction* all beginning with the acknowledgment of God (e.g., in [Prov 1:7, 9:10, 15:33](#), etc.), and considering what St. Paul does in [1 Corinthians 1](#) and [2](#), with the idea that the Greeks discovered God apart from revelation, it is disturbing that so many believers have been willing historically to accept Strato’s naturalistic axiom, that the principles for interpreting the world should be found in the world itself, rather than in an eternal principle or “god” outside the world. Following David Hume’s acceptance of this thesis, Antony Flew has insisted on his “presumption of atheism.” Yet many Christians have remained oblivious to the anti-Christian character of such a naturalistic assumption, allowing Strato free rein in the lower realm of Nature.

One would think that for the Bible-believing Christian, it would be obvious enough that simply because he is the Creator of the world, God’s own prior interpretation of the cosmos would have to be the necessary condition and ground for all true interpretation of reality. Surely,

the place to start to understand the world would most naturally be with what God actually says about it? For example, this would define out of court any theory that asserts an eternal world or “matter” over against the creation of everything finite in time. But if [Genesis 1:1](#) and [John 1:1–3](#) are allowed to define Aristotle’s eternal matter out of court, why should we not also believe that [Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, and 15:33](#) define Aristotle’s empiricism out of court as an adequate *basis* for a believer’s theory of knowledge?

Aquinas no doubt believed that he had a properly unified world view, rather than the dichotomy suggested to us by the division between Nature and Grace. How then, was the gap to be bridged? For Aquinas, although it was true that human nature in its mind, emotion and will, was depraved by the Fall, this depravity was reversed in every Catholic at Baptism, which sacrament regenerated the soul, freeing it to function in essentially the same freedom that Adam had before the Fall. Free will therefore operated equally well in both the lower realm of Nature and in the higher realm of Grace. It was man’s metaphysical autonomy that bridged the gap in practice, between Nature and Grace, as he reasoned his way up the chain of Being by analogy and allegory from the lower to the higher realm.

The other unifying feature of the Thomas synthesis between Nature and Grace was provided by this “analogy of Being.” This guaranteed that because “even the different beings of the spiritual and the material have Being in common,” (*Summa theologiae* I: q.65, a.1), there is an “analogy” or likeness between the finite and the infinite which makes it possible to use human reason to cross the epistemic gulf between them.

Thomas is seen jumping this gap in his famous conclusion(s) to each of the five ways, “and this [conclusion to the argument] is called God.” This facile equation of such an entity as a prime mover with the God of Christianity is one of the most serious problems besetting the proofs. As one reformed apologist pointed out, believers might reasonably hope that the theistic proofs *are* all invalid, for should one of them be successful, we would be faced with proof for a God *other than* the God of the Bible! In other words, Christians should see Aristotle’s god as an idol.

Syncretism In The Early Fathers

Whether the earliest Christians to venture into philosophical apologetics took seriously the fact that the Bible *presupposes*, rather than *proves* the existence of God, is not always as clear in most Fathers as it was to Tertullian. What *is* clear, is that they quickly began to borrow the arguments of the Greeks wherever they sensed a philosophic lack in the Bible. This “lack” was really created by the way the Greeks asked the questions, and formulated their objections to Christianity. Instead of questioning the presuppositions on which the questions were based, the early Fathers sought to respond to objections against religion in much the same way that their Greek mentors in philosophy had been doing for many years. Terms and arguments, involving important controlling presuppositions, were all happily borrowed wherever they seemed for the moment useful, without regard for the implications these ideas might later have for the future of the Christian worldview. But a short-term solution might eventually come to have long-term problems hiding in its fabric, which would demand further attention in a later context, and even undermine some further argument or doctrine down the pike.

Perhaps the most startling example of this “long-term” effect in our own day, starts with the time-honored attempt to solve long-standing problems in evangelical theology by appeal to a libertarian concept of free will. The “free will defense” has long been popular as a short-term solution to the problem of evil, but what happens when the further quite reasonable conclusion is

drawn, that to be “truly free” (*i.e.*, in the sense required for the accepted answer to the problem of evil), it must also be impossible for God to know future contingencies that depend on such freewill choices? In this way, the “openness of God” movement is now undermining the entire structure of the traditionally-conceived attributes of God. Yet nobody in that movement seems willing to question the initial presupposition of libertarian free will. This dogma is simply taken for granted, and is given a privileged status as unquestionable.

A most blatant early exponent of the program of syncretism was the very influential Clement of Alexandria (*ca.* 150–215 AD), who clearly studied previous syncretists like Justin, but also noted the connections between Greek thought and biblical revelation in the writings of Philo Judaeus (d. *ca.* 50 AD). Philo was a contemporary of the Apostles who sought to combine Greek thought with the Old Testament by simply allegorizing the parts that didn’t fit. Clement also learned syncretistic philosophy from Pantaenus, first head of the famed catechetical school of Alexandria. It is now generally agreed that he probably also knew Ammonius Saccus, (d. about 240 AD), whose work inspired the Neo-platonist movement, and who was the teacher of both Origen and Plotinus. It would appear that Clement was in fact saturated in the philosophical atmosphere of Alexandria’s Middle Platonism, and tried to do for Christianity what he had seen Philo do for Judaism.

Despite his desire to formulate a “*Christian Gnosticism*,” Clement shows no understanding of the effects the Fall had on the intellectual cast of the natural mind. He simply equates human reason with the “breath of life” breathed into Adam in [Gen 2:7](#) (*Stromateis*, i. 94. 2, and v, 87. 2). In that context he connects the *ennoia phusike* (natural insight, common intellect) of all wise men with the human ability to reason, breathed into Adam at his creation (v. 88. 1–2). He considered that the “breath of life” imparted something of the Logos to man, identified with the “image” of God (v. 95. 4–5). The concept of a natural revelation is developed by Clement in *Stromateis*, i. 94. 3–4, and v. 87. 3–88.1. He thought the Greeks not only had the potential for understanding God’s revelation in nature, but actually were correct in their grasp of nature’s true principles. In i. 26. 2ff, he refers to both innate wisdom and divine inspiration from the Logos as sources of Greek wisdom (cf. v. 88. 2–3). In v. 29. 4 he even represents Pythagoras and Plato as inspired prophets! Elsewhere he compares Greek thought to showers rained on them by God, or to seeds broadcast by the divine Sower. He seems to have got these images from Philo, Justin Martyr, and the Wisdom of Solomon. Likewise in Ecclesiasticus, human wisdom is compared with a rainfall of divine Wisdom. For Clement, as for Philo, the human *nous* (mind) is the divine element in all men. Human wisdom is viewed in Philo, Justin, and Clement as a seed or particle of the original Logos. The parallel with Stoicism and with Plato himself before them, is very apparent here.

Both Justin and Clement therewith trace both human philosophic speculation and the special revelation of the Prophets back to a common source, effectively blending natural theology with revelation. Both Greek philosophers and biblical Prophets are alike divinely inspired.

But Clement is not satisfied with this. He also argues with Justin and Philo, that the Greeks plagiarized the Old Testament writings, and also that much Greek thought has a demonic origin (in such events as the irruption of angels found in the interpretation of [Genesis 6:1–4](#) in Enoch 16:3), that angels descended from heaven to mate with human women and generate the false religions taught in the heathen mythologies. In this way, he can have his philosophic cake and eat it too, for Clement treats this theft of divine wisdom as an act of divine providence.

By the time we observe Clement’s acquiescence in the further notions that the observable world is but an image or representation of a spiritual world of ideas above, that God made the world of a pre-existent matter rather than *ex nihilo*, and that although the world was “created,” it

was not generated in time, but in eternity past, we realize that he is no longer developing a Christian philosophy, but *a christianized gnosticism*. In fact, Clement's general view of the Greeks is that their *gnosis* was intended by God to prepare the world for the "true *gnosis*" of the Christian revelation. This is the theme developed so fully by Eusebius of Caesarea's *Preparation For The Gospel*, which summarizes the syncretistic approach to the Greeks in some detail, providing what became the classical statement from the third century onwards. Its eventual fruits in the theology of Eastern Orthodoxy can be observed in such competent accounts as Vladimir Lossky's *The Mystical Theology Of the Eastern Church*, in which the Neo-platonist vision of the sixth-century Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite is treated as if it were an essential part of the apostolic deposit!

It must be said in his favor however, that Clement was at least trying to respond to the two most serious problems faced by apologists in the second and third centuries. First, not only did many uneducated Christians have a highly negative attitude to philosophy and to Greek education in general, a "fundamentalist" attitude evidencing a full retreat from any responsibility for developing a full-scale Christian philosophy out of the materials of revelation, but secondly, philosophers themselves were writing detailed refutations of Christian claims, of which the *Alethes Logos (True Doctrine)* of Celsus is the best known. Much of this pagan attack on Christianity has been reconstructed from the extensive quotations given by Origen in his famous answer, the *Contra Celsum* and is available in a recent edition.

But the question remains to fester, that the attempt to christianize Greek philosophy is necessarily bedeviled by the basis of all non-Christian thought systems in the fallen assumption of human autonomy, with its concomitant problems of naturalism, Being-in-general, and the perennial conflict of an ultimate unity with an ultimate diversity. It could usefully be argued that the early church developed the doctrines of Canon, *creatio ex nihilo*, and Trinity in response to these three problems.

The Pre-Socratics

Little attention will be given here to the details of the Greek ideas of God before Socrates. The important point is that the entire pre-socratic program was based on the Stratonician assumption of a self-interpreting Being-in-general which was really an eternally evolving *organism*. That is, the eternal substance of Being was a living thing. The word *hylozoism* was coined to describe this notion, and means "living matter." The evolving world we experience was "more like a cabbage than a machine," as one writer put it.

By "God" the pre-socratics either meant

- 1) the eternal substance out of which the world evolved, or
- 2) the universal principles of unity, diversity, law and change which were somehow innate within that evolving substance from the beginning. This living and evolving life-process threw up plants, animals, and men, as well as
- 3) the finite polytheistic divinities of the mythologies, as it flowed on in time. As a representative of meaning #2), we shall consider here only Xenophanes of Colophon.

Xenophanes is credited with a strong view of "the One God." The fragments and references that remain of him indicate that he was asserting the absolute unity of the One God over against the polytheism of his day, and collectively, his account leads to the view that his One God was in fact identical to the unity of Being as a universal cause of the *phainomena* (appearances) of the Many. He does not definitely deny the existence of the Many as Parmenides was to do, but like

Pythagoras and Theagenes of Rhegium, he does use allegorism to show the “real meaning” of the polytheistic myths. Even the gods of the pantheon are reduced to phenomena, although Xenophanes seems to have thought that the natural forces of the world really did have “gods” animating them. Of “the One God” he said that he “is all sight, all thought, all hearing...[he] without effort brandishes all things by the thought of his mind (*noon phreni*) [he] abides ever in the same, never moving.” He “is coherent with all things (*sumphune tois pasin*).” Over against the many gods, he is “eternal” (*aidios*), not “immortal” (*athanatos*), being both “unbegotten” (*agenetos*) and “free from becoming” (*agenetos*). And over against these attributes, all phenomena, including the soul, is made of material substances of varying grades, so that limit and flow, or rest and motion, can apply to phenomena only.

But nowhere in the pre-socratics do we find a theistic “proof” that starts with the world and concludes with a distinct Creator-God. The reason is obvious. Since the ultimate divinity is Being-in-general, this is to be presupposed, not proved. So Xenophanes illustrates both the strength and the irrelevance of presocratic speculation about the reality of a god. It was not until Plato and Aristotle, that the task of refuting the denial of the existence of gods seems to take the form of an attempt to prove their existence. And even then, though the form of the argument is increasingly clear, the result is still highly ambiguous, for nothing in Greek thought from Thales to Plotinus gives any solution to the problem of pantheism versus polytheism, to the perennial One-and-Many problem.

Plato

The main source in Plato’s work on natural theology is his loosely-argued defense of the existence of God (or gods) in the *Laws*, chapter X. This is a dialogue in which an unnamed “Athenian” explains to his largely acquiescent hearers why it is inappropriate for philosophers to be allowed to teach either, 1) that there are no gods, or 2), that the gods do not concern themselves with human affairs (a complaint commonly made about the group who coalesced around Epicurus in the following century), or 3), that the gods can be bribed and distracted from concerns of justice by sacrifices and prayers. Sometimes Plato refers to “God” as if he means a single personal deity, and more often to “the gods” as a general reference, indicating that his own view of God was caught in the classic Greek dilemma of the unity and diversity of the Ultimate. Much of value has been written for centuries on “Plato’s view of God,” but the upshot of this discussion is that he equated Being-in-general with The Good, and with God as containing his “world of ideas.” So when he refers to “God,” Christians should not treat this as if it describes anything like orthodox Christian theism. This sliding scale of ideas about “the Divine” (*to Theion* or *ho Theos*) amounts only to an observation that Being, the All, the Cosmos, manifests a group of divine attributes.

So when Plato argues (in *Laws X*) to the existence of the gods from the *consensus gentium* (agreement of the nations), he is simply claiming the common sense view that people recognize that human nature as a whole senses the presence of God in the order of the world. When he argues in the same context that the orderly motions of the sun and stars speak of the gods, he is merely pointing to a “design factor” in the universe itself. He also observes that the love the gods have for justice is an appropriate basis for human laws, but this speaks only of our need for standards, not of a “proof.” Plato’s argument that the motions and changes of the world require a self-moved origin which he calls the soul, and then equates with God, comes closest in this dialogue to a theistic proof as we recognize it today. Unfortunately, he never transcends the

problem of how to decide between one God and many. That task he left to his star pupil, Aristotle, who “solves” the problem simply by offering a quote from Homer averring that “the rule of many is not good: let the ruler be One” (*Illiad*, ii, 204). But Christians do not consider that the answer to polytheism is pantheism, any more than the answer to Plato’s rationalism is Aristotle’s empiricism.

Aristotle

In book twelve (*Lambda*), parts 7, 8, and 9 of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle discusses the necessity of a prime mover, himself unmovable, whom he equates with the Intellect of the cosmos. This first cause of all motion in the world has been described as “Thought thinking itself,” because, he says, “the Intellect and its intelligible object are the same.” He speaks of an “actuality [which] is in virtue of itself, a life which is the best, and is eternal. We say that God is a living Being which is eternal and the best, so that life and continuous duration and eternity belong to God, for this is God.” In section 8, he makes the point that “it is of himself then, that the Intellect [God] is thinking, if he is the most excellent of things, so that Thinking is the thinking of Thinking.” This eternal Thought is a “first principle,” because the cause of eternal motion must itself be eternal and immovable. “It causes the primary motion, which is eternal and one.”

The point will not be labored here that Aristotle’s prime mover is nothing much like the Jehovah of the Bible. He has no interest or involvement with the things that move further down the causal chain, like us. It is not even clear that we are among his thoughts at all.

In these parts of the *Metaphysics*, we are presented with a series of propositions which may seem at first to be a bit disconnected in the text, but together they add up to a very clear example of what has come to be known as the Cosmological Argument. It is from this source that Thomas Aquinas developed his own version of this proof in the several “ways.”

It must not be forgotten that when St. Thomas refers to “the Philosopher,” he means Aristotle. It should also be remembered that Thomas already had two unambiguous examples before him, of how Greek philosophy (particularly Aristotle) could be used in the service of a religious apologetic. First, the Muslims had already discovered the Greek originals of the Stagirite, and had translated them into Arabic while using Aristotle’s theistic arguments to defend Islam against Christian objections. In fact, Aristotle first appeared in Europe in Arabic, from which the mediaeval Latin texts were translated. Then second, the great Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides had already copied his aristotelian teachers Averroes (Ibn Rush’d) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina) to produce his apologetic for Judaism, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, a strongly aristotelian work. In his *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas would beat Jew and Muslim hollow at the great game of syncretistic apologetics. We have here a case of the common maxim that great artists have great teachers. There is also something to be said for the advantage of not being a pioneer in such matters. By the time Thomas came to the task, many of the pitfalls involved in the defenders of a religion based on revelation trying to make use of Greek ontology and epistemology based on the “Stratonician presumption” had been noted already by the Muslims. The bottom line however, is that Thomas’ biblical motivations undermined his aristotelianism, while his uncritical acceptance of Greek presuppositions undermined the coherence of his theology. These incoherencies were soon to be taken advantage of by William of Occam. But that’s another story.

Later Greek Philosophers

An important Stoic influencing the early church was Epictetus. He flourished in the second half of the first century, and became widely popular. Paul (and so Luke) seems to have quoted him in [Acts 17](#)). He explicitly argued for God's existence from the design and beauty of the colors and the eye designed to see them. "In this great city (the world) there is a Householder who orders everything." The abilities of the human body correspond to the properties of the external world like a sword to its scabbard. "From the very construction of a completed work, we are used to declaring positively that it must be the operation of some Artificer, and not the effect of mere chance." This is probably as near to a formal proof of God we will find in Epictetus, but since our rational soul is itself a little bit of the universal Logos, it naturally gravitates to God as its Origin. Epictetus recognizes also the omnipresence and Fatherhood of God, and his loving providence and goodness. The rationality of man requires not only that we acknowledge God's sovereign right to do with us what he will, but demands sincere worship also. The appeal to God is natural for the wise man, and a formal proof would be unnecessary, since nobody was denying the existence of ultimate Being.

In short, for the Greeks, a natural Theology is the same as the theology of Nature. Ultimately, *Being* is God; *to Theion* is just the divine element of Reality.

Two Key Scriptures Often Misused

Romans 1:16–32. These verses are the *locus classicus* for the topic of natural theology, and are regularly quoted in its support, although they offer no formal proof for God's existence in themselves, and expressly state that the knowledge of God seen in the creation is *revealed* by God, not that one could start from a lower realm of science to reach the higher realm of revelation.

To begin with, verse 18 states that the thing being *revealed* from heaven is the "wrath of God" on the unrighteous, not the existence of God in itself. Reformed theologians call this God's General Revelation, to distinguish it from Special (or verbal) Revelation. What can be known of God from the creation is said to be perfectly clear and obvious, because God has already "made it obvious" (*phaneron. . . ephanerosen*). Indeed, that God is eternal, that he is unimaginably powerful, and that he has personal divinity (*theiotes*) are three things about God that are said to be obvious to the sinner from the creation of the cosmos. So clear and obvious is this essentially universal revelation, that Paul notes that "they are without excuse," (*anapolegetos*) or "without an apologetic" for their sin. He adds (verses 21–23) that sinners *start out* with this virtually innate revelation, and instead of being thankful ("when they already knew God,") they fail to glorify God, and actually *suppress* this natural awareness of God's presence. Ultimately, their replacement of this revelation by worship of idols is caused by "worshiping and serving the *creation* instead of the *Creator*." This is a clear reflection on Adam and Eve's turning from what God had said about the forbidden fruit to the properties of the fruit itself, called "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" by John in [1 Jn 2:16](#). They simply "did not wish to retain God in their knowledge." Paul did not see the Stoic "citizenry of the Cosmos" as a university of seekers. Belief in the divinity of the Cosmos is a substitute for, not a searching for, the real Creator "who is blessed forever" ([1:25](#)).

Paul's perspective is a far cry from the tradition of trying to start with selected attributes of the Cosmos, and trying to formulate arguments from them that some kind of "god" exists. Aristotle's bizarre Prime Mover is proof enough of this.

Acts 17:16–34. The Areopagus Address is not an exercise in apologetic dialogue or bridge-building. It is a radical repudiation of the entire structure of the Hellenistic worldview, and contains at least twenty separate expressions that together contradict everything of importance in the Greek religio-philosophical vision. Paul starts by observing that they admit ignorance of the divinity, calls them highly superstitious, idolatrous, ignorant, self-contradictory, and then proves that their worship contradicts their theology. He quotes the Stoics Aratus and Epictetus against the Stoics, and plays off the pantheists against the polytheists. Finally, he tells them that God authoritatively as their Creator, *commands* them to repent and believe in a particular man called Jesus, who is not even a Greek, but a Jew!! This kind of particularism went against the very grain of philosophic Hellenism, with its vaunted attitude of superiority to the particular ethnic faiths, and its claim to offer a "citizenship of the world." The coup de grace comes in verse 31 with the claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Every Greek "knew" this was impossible, and in any case was unnecessary, because of the inherent immortality of the soul. Who in heaven would need a material body in the after-life? The very idea was absurd. Virtually everything Paul said was a threat, or a challenge to the rationality and sophistication, of the people before him. His analysis reduces the Greek worldview to a mass of self-contradiction, and is predicated throughout on the basic criticism of all Greek thought, that they denied the Creator-creature distinction, and started with Being-in-general instead.

Still, as Luke says on another occasion, "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (**Acts 13:48**). It was a tiny group, but one of them was a member of the Areopagus council itself, and would have his name plagiarized by an important syncretist of the future, the pseudo-Dionysius, about 500 AD.

Although individuals might indeed seek after God and perhaps even find him (**17:27**), it is a very feeble seeking, and a highly tentative finding, considered apart from Special Revelation. The Areopagus address only confirms **Romans 1**, and effectively illustrates what Paul would say about Greek philosophy in the first two chapters of First Corinthians. The Greeks by their wisdom, *knew not God*. The essential thing they lacked was those "words which the Holy Ghost teaches," the propositional truth of special revelation (**1 Cor 2:6–16**), in terms of which alone experience can yield Truth.

The fact remains that any form of getting at the knowledge of God by starting with the creation is without countenance in the Bible. From Moses' opening statement that in the beginning God created the world, through Solomon's insistence that all forms of human knowing must begin with the recognition of who Jehovah-God is, to John's poem to the Creator (in **Revelation 4:8–11** and **5:8–14**), as the one who is alone glorified by his own creation, the Bible makes God the ultimate reference-point for all intelligibility whatsoever. For the Prophets Apostles, it's no God, no meaning at all.

Syncretism

From the earliest Apologists of the second century, through the fuller attempts at Christian philosophy, to the full-scale systematic theology of Thomas Aquinas and so on to the present, those engaged in apologetics have been continuously tempted to make Athens at least a sister city to Jerusalem. This is very evident in the long history of attempts to join one system or

another to the biblical revelation, whether as a “Preparation Of The Gospel,” a Christian Gnosticism or Platonism or Aristotelianism. But all the great battles of philosophy are won or lost in the area of presuppositions, and unless our presuppositions come from God’s Word as the determining revelation, false assumptions will be allowed to replace them. This has been true with a vengeance in the long attempt to develop a “natural theology” out of our experience of the world without first allowing God to be what he must be in the nature of the case, the ultimate reference-point and presupposition of all Christian rationality.

One of the most powerful tools for the facilitation of syncretistic systems has been allegorism, the ancient system of transformist hermeneutics that allows the interpreter to make an earlier text say virtually anything he wants. It was invented by the Greeks in order to make the mythologies speak a philosophy they knew not of, and from such syncretists as Philo and Clement, and Origen, it spread to the entire Catholic Church. By the Middle Ages every word and phrase in the Bible was assumed to have a “four-fold sense.” Any “holy tradition” could by this method be found *somewhere* in the Bible, depending only on the ingenuity of the interpreter. As Hack points out, “from Theagenes of Rhegium (late sixth century) on, the ingenious stupidity of this device commended it to Greeks of a philosophic bent” (p. 68). It simply allowed anything to be combined with anything else: “the Stoics devoted to it a large part of their energies, and smoothed the way for the expansive allegorical discourses of Philo and of the Christian Fathers.”

The ultimate failure of a Christian philosophy erected on pagan presuppositions, is to be told by the unbeliever when we confidently invite them to “Come over to my position” is, “What do you mean, Come over? *You are already in my position, and you don’t even know it!*”

Conclusion

If the warning of Solomon that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, knowledge, and instruction” (in [Prov 1:7](#), [9:10](#), [15:33](#), and elsewhere) is not allowed to include God’s sovereignty over the question of presuppositions, it will quickly be reduced to a platitude with no point of contact with the world of apologetic thought. Apologists will then continually be tempted to fabricate a common ground with their “cultured despisers” that does not really exist. And they will be tempted to ignore the Creator-creature distinction of [Genesis 1:1](#) in order to chat with the Greeks about Being and non-Being, just before they are caught in the bear-trap of the One-and-Many dilemma, from which no believer has ever escaped intact.

Unless Solomon’s warning is taken at face value, it is only a matter of time before a compromised apologetic disintegrates under the weight of its own self-contradictions, however we may cover them with the plasters of “antinomy,” “paradox” and “mystery.”

Sources And Further Reading

On *Clement of Alexandria*, the doctoral thesis of that title (Oxford, 1971) by Salvatore Lilla is especially helpful on Clement’s embracing of the Greeks. On mediaeval thought, especially Thomism, the classic studies of Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit Of Mediaeval Philosophy*, and *The History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* are probably still the best places to start. The unfolding of the Nature-Grace dichotomy is effectively described by Wilhelm Windelband in his *A History of Philosophy*, pages 301–347. Gordon Clark explains the fallacies of the traditional theistic proofs in his *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, (Trinity, 1986) pages 28–43, and so does

