



Natural Theology and a Priori Knowledge of God: A Lutheran Perspective on Gifford, Swinburne, and McGrath

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Abstract

As the father of the Protestant Church reformer, Luther has made limitations on natural theology. He has criticized natural theology; even at first, he rejected natural theology. However, today we see that natural theology has been constructed by several Protestant Christian theologians, among others: Gifford, Swinburne, and Alister McGrath. The problem is whether natural theology is in accordance with the doctrine or teachings of the Protestant Christian Church? The author's purpose is to find out whether the teachings of natural theology are in accordance with the doctrine of the Protestant Church and how they are applied in the life of the congregation? The research method was carried out with a literature study with the following stages: (i) First, observing and analyzing Luther's criticism of natural theology. (ii) Second, observing the limits of natural theology constructed by Gifford, Swinburne and Alister. (iii) Third, the author analyzes each of their definitions of natural theology. This analysis and evaluation is based on Luther's critique of natural theology. For Gifford's natural theology, knowledge of God is limited to a priori knowledge only, because knowledge is obtained from nature and the human mind not from God's revelation, whereas for Swinburne and McGrath, knowledge from nature stems from faith in Christ Jesus so that a priori knowledge of God can be known. For Swinburne, rational knowledge of nature can support faith in God, while McGrath does not require rationality in believing in God. In this case it is different from Luther, because according to him, the emergence of absolute faith is only by special revelation from God and nothing else, nor as a companion, so as not to become an idol.

Article History:

Received: November 6, 2023

Accepted: December 30, 2023

Published: January 30, 2024

Keywords:

Natural

Natural theology

Aposteriori

Apriori

Rationality

INTRODUCTION

Natural theology has not yet been presented to the congregation, based on the author's experience in church life. In actuality, a lot of people inquire about it. Natural theology has been defined differently by Adam Lord Gifford (1820–1887), Richard Swinburne (2012), and Alister

McGrath (1953). As the founder of the Protestant Church and a reformer, Martin Luther (1483–1546) also frequently criticized natural theology. Luther has defined or limited natural theology in a few ways. Martin Luther's view that people cannot fully understand God or find salvation by using reason or observing nature alone is strongly tied to his criticism of natural theology¹. Luther held that human reason got warped with the fall of man in sin (original sin). Because of sin, man was unable to completely comprehend God or His will using only reason or creation observation. Despite being able to infer God's existence from nature, humanity had very little knowledge of God's character or will. As a result, natural theology cannot help people come to a genuine grasp of the saving God². The issue is whether Gifford, Swinburne, and Alister's natural theologies align with Protestant Christian Church beliefs.

Finding out if there is a Protestant Christian natural theology and how it is used in the lives of Protestant Church congregations is the author's goal. The author first examines and comprehends Luther's overall critique of natural theology in order to respond to this query. Second, the author presents the definition of natural theology developed by Protestant Christians Gifford, Swinburne, and Alister. Third, the author assesses Gifford, Swinburne, and Alister's definitions of natural theology. Luther's critique of natural theology serves as the foundation for this assessment. The evaluation's findings provide insight into each natural theology's place within Protestant Christian theology.

Luther's Criticism of Natural Theology

Luther's criticism of natural theology is divided into two parts, namely: (i). The inevitability of natural theology, (ii). The problem of natural theology.

Inevitable Natural Theology

The Heidelberg debate of 1518 is the fundamental book that initiates the Lutheran tradition's consideration of natural theology. Luther makes the following claims in theses 19–22, which are typically regarded as the foundational statement of Lutheran theology of the cross. 19: That individual does not merit the title of theologian who deliberately sees (conspicuously) the unseen things of God as they are comprehended through God's action. 20: He is deserving of the title of theologian who comprehends the posterior (posteriora) and conspecta (visible) aspects of God as they are seen in suffering and the cross. 21: According to a theology of glory, good is evil

¹ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation (1518)* (Chicago, IL: Independently, 2018).

² Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Fort Wayne, IN: Luther Press, 2013).

and evil is good. A theologian of the cross explains the true nature of reality. 22: The intelligence that discerns (identifies) God's invisible things based on his³.

The statement is frequently seen as a rejection and criticism of metaphysical, rational, and speculative theology: Speculating on the wonders of the universe that human reason has created does not lead to knowledge of God. As the opposite and posteriora of the beautiful characteristics of the unseen God, the knowledge of God can instead be discovered in Christ, under His humanity and suffering on the cross.

In Thesis 19, Luther actually suggests that God does have invisible qualities (*invisibilia Dei*), which can be "noticed" or conjectured (*conspicere*), as comprehended (*intellecta*) through God's creation, the universe⁴. This appears to have been taken into consideration throughout Thesis 19's trial period⁵. Knowledge is of little use if it is viewed as something that can be attained rather than as something that cannot⁶. The insight that results from speculating on the paranormal is not inherently bad, according to Thesis 24, but it is abused. Thus, the author contends that Luther's goal in this argument is not to refute the idea that knowledge of God will inevitably follow from conjecture about creation. The caliber of such knowledge is the issue.

Luther claims that all people have an idea of God or a definite recognition of Him (*notio divinitatis*) in his Lectures on Romans (1515–1516)⁷. In a very precise sense, Luther seems to contend that the idea of *notio* has two historical origins. On the one hand, he claims that it is an a priori category that resides in the human heart and cannot be hidden⁸. Luther refers to the natural ability to distinguish between right and wrong as theological synthesis and practical syllogism. At least in part, the inherent knowledge of God is the source of the moral rule⁹. Luther appears to adhere to the notion that God is the God of ultimate good and, hence, the principle of goodness, which may be the reason he ascribes knowledge of God to the phrase ultimate practical syllogism. Luther believed that people must be aware of God's existence and that He possesses certain divine qualities, such as being everlasting, all-powerful, immortal, able to assist, invisible, wise, pious,

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016)

⁴ Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518 (Theology)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997)

⁵ Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*.

⁶ Robert Kolb, *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology* (2014)

⁷ Lectures on Romans (1515-1516)

⁸ Luther's Works, Vol. 25: Luther's Lectures on Romans (translated by W. H. T. Dau)

⁹ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (1989)

and merciful to those who seek him out. Although it may occasionally be disputed, this understanding is a self-evident basic principle that is inherent in natural reason and cannot be refuted. Luther believed that the principles of reason are understood by a sort of supernatural illumination whose source is God; therefore, it also has epistemological justification. But during the fall season, the light of reason had grown so feeble in comparison to the light of faith that it was inappropriate for handling spiritual, mysterious, and supernatural matters.

Because reason lacks an intuitive understanding of God, even though we know He exists, the fall's loss of the higher, spiritual light of faith has resulted in man's inability to relate the abstract qualities of God to the concrete, invisible, and unfathomable divinity that is the real God. People mistakenly ascribe these qualities to gods who are abstract conceptualizations of some particular created good, like riches or power, or to concrete created objects (idols) in place of the true God. Luther's assertion that faith and conviction make one's God that is, that man deifies what he believes in most is based on this principle¹⁰.

Luther argued that the a priori conception of God always leads to man creating a god of some sort. Luther, however, seems to believe that the idea of God can also be arrived at by inferring it backwards, from its effects to its source. Luther claims that God's invisible qualities have been evident since the beginning of time, proving that God's existence and duration can be inferred from effects, or as a cause, in relation to Romans 1:20. Given that God is the provider and maker of natural things, this line of reasoning to which Luther alludes in thesis 19 of the Heidelberg debate can also explain some of God's qualities through the observation of excellent things that have been created¹¹. Thus, knowledge of God acquired in this manner is predicated on a priori reasoning, which takes empirical reality as its foundation.

However, Luther's examination of the same text rather intermingledly suggests that he is not very interested in differentiating between these two forms of information or in differentiating between the ways of thinking linked with them. Furthermore, Luther doesn't seem to be concerned in developing or debating specific reasons for God's existence. It appears that he merely accepts Aristotle's ideas and the Augustinian tradition's belief that reason can explain the concept of God. The cosmological argument refers to the natural knowledge of God that philosophers hold¹².

¹⁰ Luther's Works, Volume 1: Lectures on the Psalms, I: Psalms 1-50 (Luther's Works, Vol. 10)

¹¹ Robert Kolb, *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*. (2014)

¹² Luther's Works, Volume 1: Lectures on Romans (1515-1516).

The Problem of Natural Theology

He seems to simply agree with the views of Aristotle and the Augustinian tradition that the concept of God may be explained by reason. Philosophers' natural understanding of God is referred to as the "cosmological argument." Why is it that no one who speculates in this way is worthy of being referred to as a theologian? It appears from Luther's writings that he was a metaphysician. Even if such an abstract or formal conception may appear to be somewhat true, Luther argues that speculation on the Godhead using natural reason inevitably seems to result in a qualitatively incorrect conception of God¹³.

Luther argues that as reason is always tied to objects that can be seen, the ideas it generates are derived from those things. We can infer from the analysis of Luther's writings above that natural theology is not only feasible in Luther's view, but also most likely inherent and unavoidable for all people. Luther argues that employing natural reason to speculate about divinity is likely to result in a qualitatively warped understanding of God that may appear somewhat true despite being abstractly or formally false. Consequently, natural reason uses abstractions of the created things it is aware of to construct its conception of God. But according to Luther, there is a significant qualitative distinction between divine (or spiritual) and produced (or created) things. This indicates that whereas spiritual things are limitless and eternal (i.e., "solid"), created things are limited, perishable, and have no lasting existence (i.e., "empty")¹⁴. Luther appears to have a particular, Platonic understanding of the limitless nature of divinity: The Divine Good is not like any static or finite thing that may be owned. It is something dynamic and diffuse in itself, not a static being, but rather overflowing and sharing with itself, in accordance with the Platonic principle of goodness¹⁵. Since the theory of abstraction holds that concepts of reason are derived from sense forms, Luther's conception of the natural faculty of reason appears to be similar to that theory. In contrast, the spiritual mind does not get its conceptions from sensory experience; rather, it receives them directly from inside. According to Luther, the object is the intellectual and spiritual realm as well as the spiritual good itself, whereas the goal is the sensory world with all of its abstractions

¹³ Philip S. Watson, *The Theology of Martin Luther*.

¹⁴ J. A. O. Preus, *Justification and Rome*.

¹⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*.

and sensory goods. According to Luther, man cannot fully comprehend the nature of spiritual things if he does not have access to the spiritual realm, which is provided by faith¹⁶.

Luther's understanding of the role of creation as a symbol of God is also explained by his belief in the qualitative distinction between the nature of creation and the nature of God. According to Luther, the created world is objectively, or fundamentally, a sign of God: The line "I will open my mouth in parables" contains more insight and philosophy than if Aristotle had authored a thousand *Metaphysics*. Because it teaches us how God's wisdom creates everything lovely and how everything is wisely crafted, we learn that every visible creature is a parable and full of mystical lessons.

Because "it was He who spoke, and it was made," every creation of God is a statement about God. Therefore, it is appropriate to view creatures as God's voice. Consequently, focusing on creation means focusing on the symbol of creation rather than truth, which is God alone. "These works reveal the invisible things of God," Romans 1.26 However, one cannot use inductive reasoning to move from the sign to the signified (without producing a qualitatively indeterminate notion) due to the qualitative difference between God and created reality¹⁷.

Luther instead argues that knowledge of the divine reality that the created word expresses is essential to comprehending its meaning. Only when the reality it represents is observed can the sign be truly understood. Luther believes that the light of faith, not the light of reason, is what makes this happen. His natural reasoning was skewed toward comprehending only quiddities or material causes rather than final and efficient causes¹⁸. As previously mentioned, he also had very little knowledge of primary causes. Since natural reason uses the finite created world as its paradigm, it incorrectly views the relationship between God and the created world. This is the first issue with natural theology, following Luther. However, the qualitative difference between God and created things cannot be explained by natural reason based solely on the observation of created things. Human reason's epistemological constraints following the fall prevent it from properly comprehending the divine being unless it first has experience or intuitive understanding of divinity, which can only be attained via faith¹⁹.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*.

¹⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*.

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans (1515-1516)*.

¹⁹ One can therefore ask whether Luther accepts or rejects the principle of analogy. To me it appears that Luther would accept the analogy of being in principle, but would reject that one can make use of it to arrive at a correct

Using examples of divine characteristics as they appear in the finite created world, abstract reasoning draws inferences about the nature of divine attributes as they exist in God that are fundamentally incorrect. For instance, it can accurately infer that God is good, but it is unaware of the precise definition of divine goodness. On the other hand, there is a second barrier that prevents human reason from considering God. Luther appears to contend that human reason approaches its things in a discursive and analytical manner.

Contradictions are resolved and brought together by divine knowledge, which is the opposite of what God is and how he acts²⁰. Evil, weak, and lowly things are different from good, powerful, magnificent, and so forth things in the created universe. As a result, when human knowledge seeks God, it bases its abstract reasoning on good, strong, magnificent, and other natural phenomena. The theology of glory is this. Nonetheless, God becomes particularly accessible and present in the created world when He exhibits characteristics that are in opposition to His divine nature, such as obvious evils, frailties, and sorrows. This is mostly related to the Incarnation, but it also has to do with God's activities generally.

The Natural Theology of Gifford, Swinburne and Alister

Although they all contribute to the modern resurgence of natural theology, Gifford, Swinburne, and McGrath provide somewhat distinct definitions of the term. We might gain insight into the temporal natural theology that is emerging now by examining each of their formulations of natural theology and applying Luther's critique to their natural theology. Therefore, this article's goal is to present a thorough analysis of modern natural theology grounded in Luther's natural theology²¹.

Gifford's Natural Theology

Gifford's *Natural Theology* represents an intellectual endeavor to demonstrate the existence and attributes of God using reason and empirical evidence, independent of revealed theology or scripture. The concept was formalized through the Gifford Lectures, which were established in 1888 with the goal of promoting the study of natural theology²². Gifford's approach

conception of God. The world is indeed for Luther a creation of God, which has a causal relation to its Creator, and by this it can be known that there is a Creator, but the specific nature of this relation cannot be known by observing the created world alone, and thus the specific nature of the Creator remains unknown

²⁰ See e.g. WA 55, I, 860 gloss 13; WA 55, II, 379, 669-380, 682; AWA 2, 309, 2-7.

²¹ WA 361, 34-36: "Patet per eos, qui tales fuerunt Et tamen ab Apostolo Roma. I. stulti vocantur. Porro invisibilia Dei sunt virtus, divinitas, sapientia, iusticia, bonitas &c. haeconmia

²² John Gifford, *Lectures on natural theology*. (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1888).

emphasized that human beings could logically infer the presence of a divine being by studying the natural world and using philosophical reasoning. He believed that the universe's order, structure, and the apparent design in nature were strong indicators of an intelligent creator, making the case for God not just through faith, but through rational analysis of the world around us.

Central to Gifford's philosophy is the notion that the natural world, in its beauty and complexity, provides clear evidence of a higher power. He contended that the order and laws governing the universe, from the physical constants to biological life, could not be the result of mere chance. For Gifford, the intricacy of nature's design suggested the existence of an intelligent being who set the universe into motion. His arguments sought to establish that belief in God is not incompatible with scientific discovery; instead, scientific and philosophical inquiry into nature leads to the rational conclusion that a creator is necessary to explain the universe's origins and ongoing coherence²³.

Gifford's *Natural Theology* was influenced by earlier philosophical traditions, particularly the work of figures like Immanuel Kant and David Hume. While he acknowledged their skepticism about proving God's existence through natural means, Gifford sought to show that reason and empirical evidence could indeed lead to theistic conclusions. His work helped shape modern discussions about the relationship between science and religion, promoting the idea that theology could be informed by rational inquiry rather than solely by scriptural or doctrinal authority. The Gifford Lectures thus have had a lasting impact on both the philosophy of religion and the broader discourse on the compatibility of science and faith²⁴.

Richard Swinburne's Natural Theology

Known for his trilogy on theism, Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne (1934) is arguably the most well-liked modern advocate of natural theology. He teaches philosophy of religion at Oxford University as the Nolloth Professor. Swinburne's philosophy of religion is followed by his approach to natural theology²⁵. The foundation of Swinburne's natural theology is the belief in the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful Creator God, which is a very nice thing.

²³ John Gifford, *Lectures on natural theology*.

²⁴ John Gifford, *Lectures on natural theology*; John Gifford, *The Gifford lectures: The first fifty years*. (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1938).

²⁵ WA 1, 354, 27: "Non tamen sapientia illa mala nec lex fugienda, Sed homo sine Theologia crucis optimis pessime abutitur."

Then, in support of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, which signifies divine endorsement of Jesus' teachings, Swinburne adds to this theistic interpretation²⁶.

His work *Faith and Reason* explores the connection between religious practice and the natural theologian's profession of proving God's existence. For faith to be logical, Swinburne makes a distinction between faith (believing in God) and belief (that there is a God). Swinburne's belief that there are justifications for Christianity led him to become a persuaded theist²⁷. Swinburne's natural theology is limited by the fact that he began by accepting the existence of God and his faith in Jesus Christ. However, as a theist, he begins by holding that there are valid reasons to support the existence and veracity of Christian ideas.

McGrath's Natural Theology

In addition, McGrath (1953) is the Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at Oxford. In addition to his expertise in natural theology, McGrath is well-known for his contributions to systematic theology and history. McGrath, a prominent critic of the so-called New Atheism, was formerly an atheist himself²⁸. The foundation of McGrath's theology is unmistakably Christian²⁹. According to him, natural theology is a component of Christian theology rather than an endeavor unto itself. McGrath contends that there is no objective "rationality" or "nature" from which the veracity of Christianity can be assessed, drawing on the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre and others³⁰. McGrath argues that nature can only be viewed as created good when viewed through the lens of Christ, allowing for the ambiguity of nature and the cognitive effects of human sin. However, McGrath also contends that the "best explanation" for a number of reality's characteristics comes from Christianity.

Therefore, McGrath feels that his natural theology serves the apologetic purpose of conventional natural theology, even if some detractors view it as being overly postmodernistic and antirationalistic³¹. McGrath appears to argue that Christian doctrine offers the most comprehensive account of nature and that natural theology also serves as an apologetic tool to assist non-Christians in comprehending Christian claims. However, in order to embrace nature's witness of the Creator,

²⁶ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*.

²⁷ Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*.

²⁸ Alister E. McGrath. *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith*.

²⁹ Alister E. McGrath. *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology*.

³⁰ Alister E. McGrath. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*.

³¹ Alister E. McGrath. *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology*.

McGrath discusses the ambiguity of nature and the necessity of viewing everything through the lens of Christ. There is a conflict here, according to commentators: if Christianity really offers the best explanation, then part of its evidentiary force must also be conveyed to non-believers using natural theological arguments like Swinburne's³². McGrath believes that a proper perspective of nature is filtered through Christ. Natural theology provides global theologies with a thorough framework for fruitful discussion on the validity and implications of belief systems³³. While his natural theology starts as a "faith that seeks understanding" rather than as an attempt to validate or explain Christian beliefs, he contends that the fruitful result of this quest is "a proof of faith in and of itself"³⁴.

Evaluation of Natural Theology Based on Luther's Critique

Evaluation of Gifford's Natural Theology

Luther's criticism of Gifford's theological limitations serves as the foundation for the assessment of Gifford's natural theology. Given that natural theology is defined by Gifford as "an attempt to prove the existence of God and divine purpose through observation of nature and the use of human reason and does not rely on revelation," an a priori knowledge of God can be attained through these methods³⁵. Luther argues that as reason is inherently tied to the material world, the ideas it generates are derived from it. Natural reason-based speculation on divinity appears to provide a qualitatively skewed understanding of God, even when the idea may appear to be fairly accurate in theory or abstract³⁶. As a result, when natural reason generates an idea of God, it does so by drawing abstractions from known created objects. This indicates that whereas spiritual things are limitless and eternal (i.e., "solid"), created things are limited, perishable, and have no lasting existence (i.e., "empty")³⁷.

Luther claims that a priori knowledge, which is incredibly constrained, materialistic, and qualitatively warped, is inescapable knowledge. Since it has nothing to do with God's revelation or faith in Christ Jesus, it is impossible to know God a priori in this situation³⁸. Theologian Luther argues that people's views of nature are unrelated to God's revelation and that such observations

³² Alister E. McGrath. *A Scientific Theology: Volume 1: Nature*.

³³ Alister E. McGrath. *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology*.

³⁴ Alister E. McGrath. *Theology: The Basics*.

³⁵ John Gifford, *Lectures on natural theology*.

³⁶ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*.

³⁷ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*.

³⁸ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*.

are not worthy of being referred to as theologianic because they do not consciously see (conspicuously) the invisible things of God that are revealed via God's action³⁹. Everyone's heart is enlarged, blinded, and hardened by the intelligence that perceives (conspicuously) the invisible things of God as revealed in His works⁴⁰. Natural theology merely teaches about the existence of God and His finite characteristics, to the extent that it is not predicated on belief in the Trinity⁴¹.

Evaluation of Swinburne's Definition of Natural Theology

Swinburne's definition of natural theology posits that there is something that functions first to maintain the possibility of the existence of a very good thing, an omnipotent and omniscient Creator God. Swinburne further complements this theistic understanding by arguing for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, which he believes represents divine approval of Jesus' teachings⁴². Swinburne distinguishes between faith (believing in God) and belief (that there is a God), and he claims that, for faith to be rational, belief in God must be based on reasoned arguments derived from the world around us⁴³.

Theologian Luther, however, would challenge this framework by arguing that Swinburne's approach to natural theology falls short of the deeper, more profound knowledge of God that comes through faith and revelation. Luther believed that a theologian who focuses on natural theology, based on reasoning about God's existence from the natural world, can only comprehend God's "back side" (posteriora) and the visible things observed (conspecta), which are related to suffering and the cross⁴⁴. Luther argued that knowledge of God is not found in natural observations or reasoned arguments but rather through the revelation of God's invisible attributes, which are only fully realized through the suffering and humanity of Christ.

More specifically, Luther emphasized that underneath Christ's humanity and suffering on the cross, one can find the opposite and posteriora of God's magnificent invisible attributes, which reveal the true nature of God⁴⁵. According to Luther, it is through this divine revelation in Christ, rather than through natural reason or the physical world, that true knowledge of God is attained.

³⁹ John Gifford, *The Gifford lectures: The first fifty years*.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*.

⁴¹ John Gifford, *Lectures on natural theology*.

⁴² R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*.

⁴³ R. Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*.

⁴⁴ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*.

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*.

This stands in contrast to Swinburne's claim that reasonable belief in God can be derived from natural knowledge, as Luther maintained that faith is not a matter of rational understanding but of divine revelation.

Luther also argued that the essence of faith is wholly unrelated to a priori knowledge, since faith is entirely dependent on God's revelation and has nothing to do with the rationality that results from a priori reasoning or understanding the cosmos⁴⁶. For Luther, natural theology, which is grounded in human reason and observation of nature, could never fully grasp or explain the divine nature of God as revealed in the person and work of Christ. This critique highlights a fundamental difference between Luther's theological perspective and Swinburne's rationalistic approach to belief in God.

Evaluation of McGrath's Definition of Natural Theology

According to McGrath, natural theology is a component of Christian theology rather than an autonomous pursuit. McGrath argues that the main way to conceptualize natural theology is as "natural theology," that is, as a uniquely Christian interpretation of the natural world that reflects the central tenets of Christianity and should be contrasted with secular or naturalist explanations of nature⁴⁷. Here, the flow of thinking is not from nature to faith, but from within the Christian tradition to nature. Often, the theology of creation serves as the primary framework for these theologies of nature⁴⁸.

According to McGrath, there is a notable level of congruence or resonance between theory and observation. To put it another way, the Trinitarian view of reality and what is actually observed are highly empirical. This is not regarded as "proof" that God exists for Christians. The empirical topic of how human perception works is recognized as having significant theological implications since natural theology deals with the nature of "seeing"⁴⁹. McGrath contends that a useful heuristic framework for natural theology can be found in the so-called "Platonic Triad" of goodness, beauty, and truth. It considers the moral, aesthetic, and intellectual aspects of how people interact with nature⁵⁰.

⁴⁶ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*.

⁴⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basics*.

⁴⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basics*.

⁴⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Volume 1: Nature*.

⁵⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Volume 1: Nature*.

According to McGrath, there is no objective "rationality" or "nature" that can be used to assess Christianity's veracity. Instead, how people view nature depends on the customs they follow⁵¹. If Luther's Criticism is used to highlight the shortcomings of McGrath's natural theology, then the knowledge of natural theology is not meant to demonstrate the existence of God; rather, faith is the primary foundation for natural theological knowledge, and there is no logical justification for natural theology in terms of faith in God. Thus, faith in God is the foundation of all a priori knowledge⁵². It appears that McGrath's natural theology is worthy of being referred to as a theologian who comprehends the rear side (posteriora) and the visible things of God who is watched (conspecta) via suffering and the cross, according to the theologian Luther⁵³.

The evaluation of Gifford's natural theology through Luther's lens reveals a critical limitation in relying solely on human reason and observation of nature to understand God. Luther argues that natural theology, while attempting to establish knowledge of God through human intellect and the material world, inevitably distorts the divine because human reason is fundamentally tied to the finite and perishable nature of creation⁵⁴. This materialistic approach, according to Luther, cannot grasp the infinite and eternal essence of God, and as such, it falls short of providing true theological insight. Natural theology, based on a priori reasoning, is ultimately disconnected from God's revelation and does not offer the full, spiritual understanding that comes through faith in Christ, who reveals God's invisible attributes through His suffering and the cross⁵⁵. Gifford's attempt to use nature as a vehicle for understanding God is rooted in the very limitations that Luther critiques, since it relies on the imperfect and finite reasoning of humanity to make theological claims⁵⁶.

Similarly, the evaluations of Swinburne's and McGrath's definitions of natural theology also face challenges when measured against Luther's theological views. Swinburne's argument for a rational belief in God through natural knowledge fails to align with Luther's emphasis on the necessity of faith and divine revelation as the means to truly know God⁵⁷. For Luther, the essence

⁵¹ Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology*.

⁵² Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*.

⁵³ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*.

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*.

⁵⁵ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*.

⁵⁶ John Gifford, *Lectures on natural theology*.

⁵⁷ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*.

of faith is not rooted in human reason but in God's revealed Word⁵⁸. McGrath's approach, which attempts to frame natural theology within a Christian context, is still based on a framework that seeks to understand nature through human perception and reason⁵⁹. This, Luther would argue, remains insufficient to comprehend the fullness of God's nature, as true knowledge of God comes through faith and revelation, not through natural observation or intellectual abstraction. Therefore, both Swinburne's and McGrath's approaches still fail to adequately account for the central role of divine revelation in truly knowing God. The theological insights derived from Gifford's lectures, which suggest that natural reason can guide us to knowledge of God, are likewise challenged by Luther's insistence on the necessity of divine revelation⁶⁰.

CONCLUSION

Because knowledge is not predicated on faith in Jesus Christ, Gifford's natural theology can only derive an a priori knowledge of God from nature or the human mind, according to the evaluation of natural theology based on Luther's understanding. In contrast, Swinburne and McGrath derive an a priori knowledge of God because knowledge is predicated on faith in Christ Jesus. There is a small distinction between Gifford and McGrath, though, in that McGrath does not require reason in order to believe in God, whereas Swinburne believes that natural knowledge makes belief in God rational. In this instance, Swinburne's assertion differs from theologian Luther, who claimed that the development of perfect faith can only come from unique revelation from God and nothing else, not as a companion in order to avoid becoming an idol.

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