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BEGINNING ALL OVER AGAIN

BY

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SYNOPSIS

The present *malaise* of natural theology. The ambiguities of the attempt to combine philosophical integrity and apologetic utility. Criticisms of natural theology from the standpoints of philosophy and dogmatic theology.

The health of theology and of faith as dependent upon the health of natural theology. Natural theology and the secularized mind.

Traditional models of natural theology—Descartes and scholasticism. The oddity of the received models. The powers and limitations of recent philosophical criticism. The construction of new models and the necessity of experiment and risk. Metaphysics and religion. The inevitability of metaphysics and the implicit irrationalism of anti-metaphysical philosophy and theology.

The mistake of identifying natural theology with particular philosophical forms. The disengagement of natural theology from non-theological thought, feeling, and creative imagination. Theological misunderstanding of this disengagement and the theologian's isolation.

The malnutrition of a natural theology cut off from wider ranges of life and experience. Nourishment to be found in that world, often depicted by artists, which rejects the conventional ways in theology and religion.

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IN A VOLUME of untraditional essays, soundings, dealing with theological subjects, there is both logic and propriety in beginning where the traditional theological text-books begin. The subject of this essay is natural theology or, if you prefer, philosophical or metaphysical theology. In the following pages these three terms will be used interchangeably, and readers will remember that natural theology is commonly defined as 'that body of knowledge which may be obtained by human reason alone without the aid of revelation'.[1] Most people who think about these things at all agree that natural theology is in a poor state. Ninian Smart has aptly called it 'the sick man of Europe'.[2] Everyone has his own ideas about the reasons for this *malaise*. Not everyone agrees that it is unfortunate. There are theologians who would be glad to let the sick man die. Natural theology, outside Catholic traditions, has generally been regarded as the poor relation if not the black sheep of the family. Theologians have never been convinced that he had a proper job of work to do. If he did do any work the result usually embarrassed the rest of the family. On the other side, philosophers have seldom been happy to acknowledge the philosophical theologian as one of their family. For some time philosophers have been rather sensitive about family relations and have been very quick to exclude any whose credentials and pedigrees were not flawless. At one time Professor Ayer drew the line so sharply that the family seemed to have almost no members at all.[3]

There has been point in the philosopher's suspicion of philosophical theology. From its beginnings in Christian history it has had its feet in two different camps. On the one hand it has attempted to

[1] Cf. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1957), p. 940.
[2] *Prospect for Metaphysics*, ed. I. T. Ramsey (1961), p. 80.
[3] *Language, Truth and Logic*[2] (1946), *passim*.

deal with traditional and fundamental metaphysical questions, the stock-in-trade of everyone who was not ashamed to be known as a metaphysician: the existence of God, evil, free will, immortality, the nature of man, the meaning of history. But it has treated these questions within a special kind of theistic framework which to the independent metaphysician has seemed parochial. Not always, of course. Professor Broad's respect for the work of F. R. Tennant was that of one philosopher for another, despite the theism. On the other hand (the other foot in the other camp) philosophical theology has been engaged in Christian apologetic. It has adjusted its sights to a narrower target, the defence of Christian theism. Assuming the ultimate truth of Christian theism it has worked away at providing metaphysical arguments for the first article of faith, the existence of God. Even today, when natural theology is so widely discounted by theologians, introductory text-books on Christian belief still often begin with something like cosmological or teleological arguments for the existence of God. To the philosopher, this apologetic tendency or interest has seemed incompatible with a claim to philosophical independence. The philosopher's job is to inquire. The philosophical theologian has only pretended to inquire. His conclusions were prescribed from the outset.

There are grounds for these different suspicions voiced by theologians and philosophers. From the standpoint of dogmatic theology, natural theology will always look a dangerous enterprise. Speculative metaphysics has a way of colouring or distorting everything it tries to accommodate within its own systems. Christian theologians can never forget bygone struggles, with gnosticism, platonism, aristotelianism, and idealism. The metaphysician's motive may be of the best. He might say that he is only trying to give rational coherence to certain Christian beliefs which in their raw state lack consistency and philosophical polish. But for the theologian this process of rationalizing and polishing rubs away features of Christian faith which are essential to it and in fact make it what it is, a faith

and not a metaphysical construction. Even when the philosophical theologian is himself a Christian believer, he cannot avoid the pitfalls of metaphysical speculation. He may feel that what he does is in the interest of faith, but the terms of his labours commit him to an exaltation of human reason, a usurpation of divine prerogative. His questions are about what is or is not rational in Christian belief, not about what God has chosen to reveal of himself. The most characteristic elements in Christian faith (so the charge would continue) will always resist metaphysical categories. Philosophical theology will always remain a contradiction in terms.

For his part, the philosopher is right to expose that defensive or apologetic aspect of philosophical theology which sets it apart from the independent philosophical investigation. It is somehow a degradation of philosophical intelligence to employ it simply for means of persuasion. Whatever the end, this is more like sophistry than philosophy. When the philosophical theologian does claim an independence or philosophical wholeness for his work, the philosopher has every right to scrutinize that work with the greatest care. If he finds rhetoric masquerading as argument, or argument vitiated by inconsistency, he has a professional duty to point it out.

Any discussion of the purpose or the health of natural theology has to take into account the uneasiness of its relationship with both theology and philosophy. In our own time we cannot expect to find much encouragement for it from either side. The fashionable biblical theology, which never sees need to go beyond the words and concepts of Scripture, has no place for a philosophical examination of fundamental theological concepts, even those peculiar to Christianity. The fashionable analytic philosophy, which sees no need to open Scripture at all, has yet to be convinced that philosophical theology is a logical possibility. In such circumstances it is not surprising that philosophical theology should suffer from poor health. Would it not be simplest to let it die? The mourners would be few, and amongst them even fewer could say exactly who it was

whose death they mourned. Yet to accept this situation would, to some of us, be the acceptance of a betrayal and the beginning of the end of faith.

For the sake of bringing the issues into the boldest relief, let us put them as strongly as possible. It could be argued that the attrition and death of natural theology could not but be a prelude to the death of all theology, and even of faith, in so far as faith has any conceptual content and is not simply a matter of feelings and postures. It could further be argued that the health of Christian belief, in any period, can be measured by the health of that natural theology on which it not always visibly depends. (Parallel arguments could be made about the connexion between philosophical theology —or metaphysics—and the whole of philosophy. These, however, are not the immediate concern of this essay.) Lest this sounds the exaggeration of an academic specialist with professional interest in the survival of his subject-matter, we can add a further observation. It would be wildly disproportionate to claim that the rescue of natural theology was in itself the most important task confronting Christianity and the Church in the twentieth century. It would be almost as wild to claim that recent philosophical criticism of traditional arguments in natural theology was in our time the only formidable intellectual challenge to faith. The great problem of the Church (and therefore of its theologians) is to establish or re-establish some kind of vital contact with that enormous majority of human beings for whom Christian faith is not so much unlikely as irrelevant and uninteresting. The greatest intellectual challenge to faith is simply that thoroughly secularized intelligence which is now the rule rather than the exception, whether it expresses itself in science or philosophy or politics or the arts. It is by no means clear that anything like Christian faith in the form we know it will ever again be able to come alive for people of our own time or of such future time as we can imagine. It is just as uncertain that Christian ideas and ways of thought, as we know them, will be able to re-

engage an intelligence and imagination now so far separated from them. In comparison with these issues, the momentary fate of natural theology is of little concern. If the health of natural theology matters, it matters only because it is bound up with more important things. The burden of this essay is that it is so connected.

The connexion can be brought out only if we look more carefully and then think again about the role which natural theology does or might play. Our usual conception and our dictionary definitions of natural theology derive from the philosophical practice of the last two or three hundred years. At the beginning of the *Meditations*, Descartes wrote: 'I have always been of opinion that the two questions respecting God and the soul were the chief of those that ought to be determined by help of philosophy rather than theology, for although to us, the faithful, it is sufficient to hold as matters of faith, that the human soul does not perish with the body, and that God exists, it yet assuredly seems impossible ever to persuade infidels of the reality of any religion, or almost even any moral virtue, unless, first of all, those two things be proved to them by natural reason.'[1] The whole problem of natural theology might be written as a gloss on that revealing sentence. There was nothing startling or revolutionary about Descartes' opinion that the existence of God and the immortality of the soul might be proved by natural reason. St Thomas was clear enough about the former even if he found subtleties in the latter. And yet one suspects that in Descartes' formulation there is an important shift of emphasis from scholastic notions of natural theology and natural reason. Not only has the word reason a new set of connotations for Descartes and his age, but the relationship between philosophy and theology is seen in a different focus. We know what the scholastic manuals say about the subordination of philosophy to theology, but in the hands of philosophical and theological genius—a St Thomas—one is impressed more by the unity than the division. There is much grand (and

[1] *A Discourse on Method*, etc., Everyman's Library (1949), p. 65.

often empty) talk about the Medieval Synthesis, but that talk, even when exaggerated, points to a reality, an atmosphere and background in which it was possible to think theologically without cutting oneself off from those other ranges of thought and imagination which, in our day, have no contact with theology whatever. Perhaps this is no more than to say that while St Thomas might have understood Descartes' sentence, he would have found it puzzling that a philosopher should write it, or write it in quite that way. Did St Thomas really believe that the existence of God could be proved in the sense that Descartes believed it?

Descartes' sentence, for good or ill, is a typical model for the conventional understanding of natural theology. It could be expanded like this. There is something called natural reason which is native to all men, part of the endowment bequeathed to finite creatures by a benevolent creator. Its powers are limited, or at least in the light of Christian revelation they are called limited. That revelation is the proper subject-matter of theology. It is for the theologian to expound it to the faithful. Despite its limitations natural reason had plenty to keep it occupied. Drawing upon arguments at least as old as Aristotle it could work its way from contemplation of the natural order to certainty about the existence of a creator. The fulfilment of natural reason was metaphysics. This model is exposed to awkward questions. If such items as the existence of God could be more immediately known by revelation, why bother to cultivate natural reason? Or why not somehow make natural reason a limb of revelation, or revelation an end-product of natural reason? Others were to do both of these things, to the astonishment and horror (as we have noticed) of both theologians and philosophers. But Descartes had learned his lessons from the Jesuits well. As between natural reason and revelation, or theology and philosophy, there was a great gulf fixed. Still, he had his own kind of boldness. Even though certainty about God's existence could be gained from revelation and expounded by theology, he

perceived that this certainty was of a very special kind. It failed to impress anyone who was not already, by some means or other, a faithful believer. This suggests that there are two ways to knowledge (or kinds of knowledge) of God's existence. For the believer it was given. (Descartes' boldness had its limits. He did not ask, How?) For the unbeliever, it could be gained by rational argument. Of course, rational argument could take the unbeliever only as far as the bare belief that God exists. To learn more he would have to humble himself before revelation. But to do that much, so Descartes and others thought, was in itself a thoroughly worthy achievement.

We are so used to this model that we usually fail to notice its oddity. At one time or other people are inclined to say 'Reason can only take you so far'. Reason is thereby likened to a railway line which takes one to a frontier station. There the line ends. We all have to get off the train. There are people about who tell us what the country is like on the other side of the frontier, and it sounds very unlike what we know on this side. But this is where public conveyance ends. It is not even clear how we can get to the other side. From the railway terminus we cannot see across the frontier. Do we go on foot? Some have tried this and never came back. Others have come back and reported that there was nothing on the other side at all. Still others have come back and made detailed reports. Yet how diverse and contradictory those reports seem. But what is the matter with the railway line? Why not extend it beyond the frontier? If it can take us thus far, why not a mile or so further? How do we know that trains will not run over there, until we have tried?

This analogy must not be pressed too hard, but the kind of questions we might naturally ask about railway lines have their parallel in questions we ought to ask about natural theology and the conventional model which shapes our understanding of it. What the railway-line analogy brings out is that one conventional model will not do at all. If this is in fact what natural theology does it should

come as no surprise that both theologians and philosophers would well like to be rid of it. It simply does not work. In their different ways, philosophers and theologians have shown this clearly enough. Philosophers, from at least the time of Hume and Kant, have exposed the weakness of traditional arguments for the existence of God. They have pin-pointed logical inconsistencies, and they have put a question-mark beside the whole process of moving by a chain of causal arguments from the contents of the world (or its bare existence) to something outside the world. Theologians have worried less about logical propriety and have been chiefly dissatisfied with the premises and conclusion of the arguments. They are pessimistic about the powers of natural reason to encompass reality, and they find little or no contact between the God allegedly proved by argument and the God who, they say, can never be known except through that revelation they are charged to expound and safeguard. But as is so often the case, these criticisms from both sides, however telling in detail, have not rid us of the model itself. Our thinking is still confined to the familiar grooves: natural and revealed; reason and faith. It may seem paradoxical, but there would be point in saying that a restoration of natural theology will finally depend upon the abandonment of our present understanding of what it is.

Criticisms of specific features of the traditional model, whether from philosophers or theologians, can help in the work of revision, if only by showing us what natural theology is not. But such criticisms can just as easily mislead, for they may distract us from the main problem, the construction of some new model or models for the whole enterprise. In the last decade or so there has been a good deal of philosophical discussion which illustrates this useful but distracting kind of work. A selection of papers was recently edited by A. G. N. Flew and A. C. MacIntyre.[1] The editors claimed that these essays were new not only because recently written but because they displayed something new in the way of an approach to philo-

[1] *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (1955).