

RERE A STUDY OF NATURAL THEOLOGY FROM A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE

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A STUDY OF NATURAL THEOLOGY FROM A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

¹ In his role as the father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther placed significant limits on the concept of natural theology, critiquing it and even initially rejecting it. However, over time, certain Protestant theologians, including Gifford, Swinburne, and Alister McGrath, have ventured into constructing natural theology in various forms. The central question that arises is whether natural theology, as these theologians have defined it, aligns with the doctrines and teachings of the Protestant Church. This research aims to examine the correspondence between natural theology and Protestant doctrine, particularly in how these ideas are applied in the life of the congregation. The research is conducted through a literature study, structured in three key phases: (i) An examination of Luther's critique of natural theology, (ii) An analysis of the limitations placed on natural theology by Gifford, Swinburne, and McGrath, and (iii) A critical assessment of their respective definitions of natural theology, with particular emphasis on how Luther's critique informs this evaluation. Luther's critique emphasizes that knowledge of God, as understood through natural theology, is inherently limited, as it does not stem from divine revelation. This forms the basis of Gifford's natural theology, where he posits that human understanding of God is confined to a priori knowledge derived solely from nature and the human mind. On the other hand, Swinburne and McGrath present a different approach, suggesting that knowledge of God can be accessed through faith in Christ Jesus, which allows for the possibility of a priori knowledge about God. For Swinburne, rational knowledge of nature can support the foundation of faith in God. However, McGrath argues that faith in God is not contingent upon rational understanding, which marks a divergence from Luther's perspective. According to McGrath, absolute faith can only be obtained through special revelation from God, and should not be accompanied by rationality, lest it be mistaken for an idol. This study thus explores how each theologian approaches the relationship between faith, reason, and knowledge of God, and evaluates how these theological positions either align with or depart from the Protestant understanding as originally articulated by Luther.

Keywords: *Natural, Natural Theology, aposteriori, a priori and rationality.*

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Background of The problem

¹ The author reflects on their experience within the church, noting that natural theology has not been widely introduced to the congregation, despite growing curiosity about it. Adam Lord Gifford (1820-1887), Richard Swinburne (2012), and Alister McGrath (1953) have each developed distinct versions of natural theology, while Martin Luther (1483-1546), the father of the Protestant Reformation, has been a vocal critic of this theological approach. Luther placed limitations on natural theology, emphasizing the inability of human reason and the observation of nature to fully know God or attain salvation.

Luther's critique is rooted in his belief that after the fall of man due to original sin, human reason became corrupt, preventing individuals from fully understanding God or His will through reason or nature alone. While humans might acknowledge the existence of God through nature, Luther maintained that natural theology could not lead to a true understanding

of God or His redemptive purpose. Therefore, natural theology, according to Luther, is insufficient for comprehending the true nature of God who saves.

2. Luther's Criticism of Natural Theology¹

2.1 Inevitable Natural Theology

Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 lays out a pivotal critique of natural theology, especially in its contrast between the "theologian of glory" and the "theologian of the cross." In theses 19-22, Luther emphasizes that the true theologian is not one who contemplates the hidden and invisible aspects of God through His external works, as this kind of theological reflection leads to pride and self-reliance. Instead, the true theologian recognizes God's presence and action in the visible, suffering, and crucified Christ. Luther argues that the wisdom of the theologian of glory, who relies on human reasoning to comprehend divine things, ultimately leads to spiritual blindness and a hardened heart. In contrast, the theologian of the cross acknowledges the suffering and contradiction inherent in God's work and comes to a more genuine understanding of divine reality, seeing things as they truly are. This distinction underpins Lutheran theology's emphasis on grace, humility, and the revelation of God through the cross rather than through human speculation or natural reason.¹

Luther insists that knowledge of God cannot be obtained by contemplating the wonders of the created world through human reason alone. In Thesis 19, Luther acknowledges that there are indeed invisible attributes of God (*invisibilia Dei*) that can be "noticed" or speculated upon (*conspicere*) and understood (*intellecta*) through God's works in the created universe. However, he maintains that such knowledge is ultimately insufficient and incomplete unless it is rooted in the revelation of God through the suffering and cross of Christ, which reveals a different and more profound understanding of God's nature.² The final period of Thesis 19 seems to take this into account. Knowledge not as something unattainable, but rather as something attainable is of little value.³

Thesis 24 also states that the wisdom that comes from speculation on the supernatural is not evil in itself, but is misused.⁴ The author argues that Luther's intention in his critique of natural theology is not to deny that speculation on creation can lead to some form of knowledge of God. Instead, Luther critiques the quality of the knowledge that natural theology provides. In his *Lectures on Romans* (1515-1516), Luther posits that all humans possess a concept or recognition of God, referred to as *notio divinitatis*. He suggests that this concept of God has two sources. First, it is innate to the human heart, an a priori category that cannot be fully obscured. Luther describes this innate concept as a practical syllogism or theological synthesis, which signifies humanity's inherent ability to discern moral truths. He asserts that the moral law is partially derived from this innate knowledge of God, reflecting a natural human inclination to recognize divine attributes in moral reasoning. The reason Luther connects this concept to the idea of the ultimate practical syllogism is because he believes that God represents the ultimate good, serving as the foundation and principle of all goodness.⁵ According to Luther, humans have an inherent knowledge of God's existence and certain divine attributes, such as His eternity, omnipotence, immortality, wisdom, and mercy. This knowledge, he

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argues, is self-evident and forms a first principle in natural reason, which is generally unfalsifiable, although it may be denied by some. Luther's view of natural theology is further grounded epistemologically in the belief that the principles of human reason are illuminated by a divine light, with God as the source of this illumination. However, after the Fall, this light of reason became dimmed, and in comparison to the light of faith, it became too weak to understand spiritual and divine matters. Luther suggests that the Fall led to a disconnect between the abstract attributes of God known through reason and the concrete, invisible, and incomprehensible divinity that represents the true God.

While humans may acknowledge God's existence through reason, Luther argues that they cannot intuitively know Him, and instead, they tend to attribute divine attributes to created things, often creating idols—false gods made from specific created goods like power, wealth, or other concepts. This notion forms the basis for Luther's assertion that faith and belief shape one's conception of God, as humans tend to deify whatever they believe in most. Luther also suggests that while humans may have an a priori concept of God, they can also come to understand Him by reasoning backward from the effects in creation to their cause. Referring to Romans 1:20, he argues that God's invisible attributes are evident in the natural world, meaning that God's existence and some of His attributes can be inferred from the effects in creation. Luther points out that this type of reasoning, mentioned in Thesis 19 of the Heidelberg Disputation, may lead people to consider certain attributes of God as good by observing the goodness inherent in natural things are ascribed to God who is their giver and creator. Knowledge of God gained in this way therefore rests on a priori reasoning: it is based on empirical reality as its source. Luther does not appear to be particularly focused on distinguishing between the two sources of knowledge—reason and divine illumination—or on differentiating the methods of reasoning associated with each, as he examines the same texts a rather intermingled manner. Additionally, Luther does not seem concerned with formulating or discussing precise arguments for the existence of God. Instead, he seems to presuppose the Augustinian tradition, which asserts that the concept of God is known through reason. Luther also aligns with Aristotle's views, accepting the cosmological argument as a means of understanding the natural knowledge of God possessed by philosophers. In this sense, Luther takes for granted that knowledge of God can be accessed through human reason, without necessarily engaging in elaborate philosophical proofs or formal arguments for God's existence.

2.2 The Problem of Natural Theology

Luther believes that both pure reason and experience provide sources of knowledge about God. However, Luther criticizes natural theology, particularly the speculative use of reason to understand the Godhead. He argues that such speculation does not make one a true theologian because it leads to a distorted and incomplete understanding of God. Despite the fact that reason may seem to arrive at a somewhat correct or abstract conception of God, Luther maintains that such an approach is fundamentally flawed. His criticism stems from the belief that relying solely on natural reason for understanding God results in a metaphysical conception that distorts God's true nature. This distortion occurs because natural reason, especially after the Fall, is inadequate for comprehending the incomprehensible and concrete attributes of God as revealed through the cross of Christ. Therefore, those who engage in such speculative theology fail to grasp the true nature of God and are not worthy of the title "theologian."⁷ According to

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² Luther, reason is always bound to visible things, and as a result, the concepts it forms are based ¹ on these tangible, created realities. From an examination of Luther's texts, it can be concluded that natural theology is not only possible according to Luther, but it is also likely natural and inevitable for all humanity. Luther acknowledges that speculation about divinity using natural reason is likely to lead to a distorted and qualitatively flawed conception of God. While this concept may seem somewhat true in an abstract or formal sense, it ultimately misrepresents God. When natural reason forms a concept of God, it does so by using abstractions of created things that humans already know.

² However, for Luther, there is a crucial qualitative difference between created things and divine things. Created things, according to Luther, are finite, perishable, and devoid of permanent ² existence—essentially "empty." In contrast, divine things are infinite, eternal, and "solid." Luther appears to understand the infinite nature of divinity in a manner akin to Platonic thought, where the Divine Good is not comparable to any finite or static object that can be possessed or fully understood. This distinction underscores the inadequacy of natural reason in fully grasping the true nature of God, as the divine cannot be reduced to the finite, transient objects of creation.

² Following the Platonic principle of goodness, it is something dynamic and diffuse in itself, not a static being, but rather overflowing and sharing with itself.⁸ Luther's view of the natural faculty of reason seems close to the theory of abstraction, as the theory of the concepts of reason being derived from sensible forms. The spiritual intellect, by contrast, receives its concepts through direct internal illumination, not through extracting them from sensory experience.⁹

¹ According to Luther, the created world is objectively a sign of God. He asserts that there is more wisdom in the verse "I will open my mouth in parables" than in all of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, reflecting his belief that every visible creature serves as a parable, containing mystical teachings that reveal God's wisdom. For Luther, every creature is a word about God, as everything in creation is a product of God's divine speech: "For it was He who spoke, and it was made." In this sense, creation reflects God and should be seen as a form of divine communication.

However, Luther cautions that focusing solely on creation leads one to concentrate on the sign rather than the reality—the reality being God Himself. Referencing Romans 1:26, Luther argues that "the invisible things of God are understood from these works," yet the qualitative difference between God and creation makes it impossible to use inductive reasoning to move from creation (the sign) to God (the signified) without distorting the true nature of God. Creation, while pointing to God, cannot provide a complete or accurate understanding of the divine on its own.

² Luther believes that in order to properly interpret the created world, one must understand the divine reality it signifies. The sign is only truly understood when the reality it points to God Himself is known.¹⁰

² For Luther, true understanding of God comes through the light of faith, not the light of natural reason. He believed that natural reason is limited and biased toward understanding only

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material causes or quiddities, rather than grasping efficient and final causes. His knowledge of first causes was also restricted, as previously explained. However, created things are qualitatively different from God in ways that natural reason cannot comprehend by simply observing creation. Due to the epistemological limitations of human reason after the fall, it cannot understand the divine being accurately unless it first receives intuitive or experiential knowledge of the divine, which is only accessible through faith. Reasoning through examples of divine attributes as they appear in the finite world may lead to conclusions about God's nature, but these conclusions are qualitatively false. For example, reason can conclude that God is good, but it cannot grasp the true nature of divine goodness.

Additionally, there is a second obstacle that hinders human reason's capacity to understand God. Luther argues that human reason is inherently discursive and analytical in its approach to objects. Divine wisdom, in contrast, reconciles and unifies contradictions. In the created world, things that are good, powerful, and majestic are distinct from things that are evil, weak, and lowly. When human wisdom seeks God, it often relies on natural things that are good and powerful as the foundation for abstract reasoning, leading to what Luther calls the theology of glory. However, God is specifically present and accessible in creation through attributes that are opposite to His divine attributes namely, through visible evils, weaknesses, and sufferings. This concept is most notably illustrated in the Incarnation but also reflects God's actions more broadly.

Swinburne then complements this theistic understanding by arguing for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, representing divine approval of Jesus' teachings.¹¹ His book *Faith and Reason* discusses the relevance of the vocation of a natural theologian from arguing for the existence of God to religious practice. Swinburne became a convinced theist as a result of believing there are reasons for Christianity.¹²

The limits of Swinburne's natural theology are that he started from believing there is a God and having faith in Jesus Christ. But as a theist he starts from believing there are reasonable arguments for the existence and truth of the doctrines of Christianity.

3.3 McGrath's Natural Theology

McGrath (1953) also currently works at Oxford as the Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion. McGrath is known for his work in history and systematic theology, but also for his interest in natural theology. A former atheist himself, McGrath has been one of the leading critics of the so-called New Atheism.¹³

McGrath's theology is rooted in explicitly Christian premises, viewing natural theology not as a separate discipline, but as an integral part of Christian theology.¹⁴ Drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and others, McGrath argues that there is no neutral "rationality" or "nature" from which the truth of Christianity can be evaluated. Rather, people's perceptions of nature are influenced by the traditions they live by.¹⁵ McGrath makes room for the ambiguity of nature, and the cognitive impact of human sin, arguing that nature can only be perceived as created good if seen through Christ. McGrath also asserts that Christianity offers the "best explanation"

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for various aspects of reality. While some critics view his natural theology as overly postmodern and antirationalistic, McGrath believes it still serves the apologetic function traditionally associated with natural theology.¹⁶ On the other hand, McGrath seems to say that Christian beliefs provide the best explanation of the whole of nature, and natural theology also has an apologetic dimension in helping to make the claims of Christianity understandable to non-believers. But on the other hand, McGrath writes about the ambiguity of nature and the need to view nature through Christ in order to accept its testimony of the Creator. Commentators see a contradiction here: if Christianity truly provides the best explanation, then surely some of this evidential power must also be communicated to non-believers through natural theology arguments, such as Swinburne's.¹⁷ For McGrath, nature is properly understood when viewed through the lens of Christ. He believes that natural theology provides a comprehensive framework through which various world theologies can engage in meaningful dialogue about the legitimacy and implications of different belief systems.¹⁸ Although McGrath's natural theology does not start as an attempt to prove or justify Christian beliefs, but rather as a "faith seeking understanding," he argues that the positive results of this pursuit serve as "a proof of faith" in itself.¹⁹

4. Evaluation of Natural Theology Based on Luther's Critique

4.1 Evaluation of Gifford's Natural Theology

The evaluation of Gifford's natural theology through Luther's critique focuses on the limits of Gifford's theology. According to Gifford, natural theology is "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." This implies that the knowledge of God obtained through the observation of nature and the use of human reason is a priori knowledge of God.

Luther, however, argues that reason is always bound to visible things, and thus, the concepts formed by reason are based on finite, created things. Speculation about divinity using natural reason, according to Luther, leads to a distorted conception of God. Although such conceptions may appear correct in an abstract sense, they are fundamentally flawed. This is because reason forms a concept of God by using abstractions of created things, which are finite and perishable, whereas spiritual things—such as God's true nature—are infinite and eternal.

Luther asserts that a priori knowledge is inevitable but extremely limited and materialistic, leading to a qualitatively distorted understanding of God. Without faith in Christ Jesus or God's revelation, a priori knowledge of God is impossible. According to Luther, any observation of nature independent of revelation does not deserve to be called true theology, as it leads to a false understanding of God's invisible attributes. As such, natural theology that is not based on faith in the Trinity only provides limited knowledge of God's existence and attributes.

4.2 Evaluation of Swinburne's Definition of Natural Theology

Swinburne makes a distinction between faith, which is the belief in God, and belief, which is the acknowledgment that God exists. He argues that for faith to be rational, belief in God must

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be grounded in rational reasoning, rather than solely on emotional or subjective experiences. From Luther's perspective, however, Swinburne's natural theology is limited. Luther would argue that knowledge of nature about God is not just about using reason to prove God's existence, but it is fundamentally rooted in faith in Christ Jesus. For Luther, a theologian who understands God's visible attributes through faith and suffering, particularly in the context of the cross, deserves to be called a true theologian. Natural knowledge of God, according to Luther, should be based on faith in God, not on rationality derived from a priori knowledge. This suggests that Swinburne's understanding of natural theology, which ties rationality to belief in God, is in conflict with Luther's view that faith comes purely through God's revelation.

4.3 Evaluation of McGrath's Definition of Natural Theology

Alistair McGrath presents a distinctive view of natural theology, emphasizing that it should not be seen as a separate discipline from Christian theology but as an integral aspect of it. He contends that natural theology must be understood within the framework of the Christian tradition, which shapes how the natural world is perceived. McGrath contrasts this Christian approach with secular or naturalist perspectives, arguing that the flow of thought moves from within the Christian tradition toward understanding nature, rather than from nature to faith. Additionally, he highlights that human perceptions of nature are influenced by the Christian traditions individuals follow, rather than arising from an impartial, objective perspective. When evaluated through Luther's critique, McGrath's natural theology aligns with the idea that natural theological knowledge does not prove God's existence, but rather rests on faith. McGrath's natural theology, therefore, also presupposes faith as the starting point for understanding God. For Luther, McGrath's approach would be considered valid for a theologian who understands God's visible attributes through faith, particularly in light of the cross. McGrath's view is consistent with Luther's in that natural theology must be anchored in faith, not purely in rational analysis.

5. CONCLUSION

The evaluation of natural theology through Luther's understanding reveals key differences between the approaches of Gifford, Swinburne, and McGrath. Gifford's natural theology, which relies on human reason and observation of nature without faith in Christ, only provides a priori knowledge of God that is materially limited and qualitatively distorted, as Luther would argue. In contrast, both Swinburne and McGrath acknowledge the centrality of faith in understanding God. Swinburne ties rational belief in God to the knowledge of nature, whereas McGrath emphasizes that natural theology is rooted in the Christian tradition. Despite these differences, both Swinburne and McGrath align more closely with Luther's view that true knowledge of God comes through faith, not through rationality or a priori reasoning. However, Luther would still object to Swinburne's attempt to rationalize faith, as Luther held that faith is solely a result of divine revelation, not rational inquiry.

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