

Greek Origins of Natural Theology

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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 of 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 Antony Flew in *God and Philosophy* (Harcourt, 1966) pages 58-123. An evangelical attempt to rehabilitate the theistic proofs can be found in chapter 13 of Norman Geisler's *Christian Apologetics*, with a much fuller discussion in chapters 5-9 of his *Philosophy of Religion*.

On the idea of God among the Greeks, *The Evolution Of Theology In The Greek Philosophers* (the Gifford Lectures of 1901-2), by Edward Caird is still serviceable, while R. K. Hack's *God In Greek Philosophy To The Time Of Socrates* (Princeton, 1931) covers the pre-socratic age, and has a good clear explanation of each philosopher, illustrated with

lots of useful quotations. Hack's account should be compared with Kathleen Freeman's *Companion To The Pre-socratic Philosophers* (Oxford, 1949), to show how the fragments of Xenophanes are variously interpreted. *The Theology Of The Early Greek Philosophers* (Oxford, 1947) by Werner Jaeger also has a good chapter on Xenophanes.

Cornelius Van Til shows how the presupposition of human autonomy causes the progressive disintegration of Christian attempts at philosophy in *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Den Dulk, 1969). In chapters IV, V, and VI of *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Baker, 1969), he traces the effects of compromise with Greek thought from the patristic age to mediaeval Catholicism. All of Van Til's works are available on a single CD from the Westminster Seminary Bookstore.

E. P. Gillett's *God In Human Thought* (New York, 1874), is an older but comprehensive two-volume history of natural theology down to Bishop Butler. Likewise, *Studies In The History Of Natural Theology* (Oxford, 1815), by C. J. J. Webb has a good essay on Plato's theology.

On Stoicism, see R. D. Hicks' *Stoic And Epicurean* (New York, 1962), A. A. Long's *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Berkeley, 1986), and the first volume of Frederick Copleston's *History of Philosophy*.

Edwin Hatch, *The Influence Of Greek Ideas And Usages Upon The Christian Church* (the Gifford Lectures of 1888) is priceless, but later scholars think that parts of it are overstated. It remains however, the most helpful outline of the subject of its title available.

I used the translations by Ross and Apostle of the *Metaphysics*, and by Jowett of Plato's *Dialogues*.

My own *No Place For Sovereignty* (IVP, 1996) shows with historical illustrations, the philosophic incompatibility of the libertarian free will theory with both the Bible and reason, and offers a calvinistic response to Clark Pinnock's "openness of God" theology, argued from specific texts of the Bible.