Natural Revelation in Creation and Covenant

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The goal of this essay is to show that Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth do *not* disagree about the existence of natural revelation or its role within Christian theology. In fact, their convergence on this issue is striking: they both believe that God is revealed in and through the created order and that theologians can and should incorporate insights derived from this natural revelation into the church's theology. They also share another important trait: they both build their claims about the existence and role of natural revelation upon the foundation of a presupposed account of God's relationship with creation. It is at this point, however, that the similarities end, because Aquinas and Barth each presuppose a *different* account of God's relationship with creation due to their distinct conceptions of Jesus Christ's saving work relative to creation. This difference leads to a striking divergence in their respective understandings of the *content* of natural revelation, so that while important formal similarities exist in their approach to natural revelation, crucial material differences remain between their views. By providing clarity about these similarities and differences, this essay seeks to make two contributions. First, it hopes to clear away misconceptions about the perceived but largely nonexistent disagreement between Aquinas and Barth on the existence and proper role of this kind of divine revelation in theology. Second, it hopes to clarify the true points of divergence between Aquinas and Barth and thus reframe the conversation between their theological heirs.

Aquinas and Natural Revelation

Aquinas begins the *Summa theologiae (ST)* with a basic assumption: humans are rational beings created by God for God. He interprets this assumption through the lens of his own biblical adaptation of the neo-Platonic theme of *exitus* and *reditus,* where creatures come forth from God and are ordered to return to him.[1] Since humans are "directed to God as to an end," their most basic need is to acquire authentic knowledge of God so they can "direct their thoughts and actions" to him.[2] Q. 1 explains how sacred doctrine addresses this need. The problem, Aquinas argues, is that even though humans are ordered to God as their true end, God "surpasses the grasp of [human] reason," so that "the truth about God, such as reason can know it, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors."[3] This leaves humans in a quandary: they are ordered to an end they cannot achieve under their own power. Sacred doctrine solves this quandary. As a science that "proceeds from the principles made known by the light of a higher science, namely, the science of God and the blessed,"[4] sacred doctrine supplies humans with what they lack: "knowledge of God not only as He is in Himself, but also as He is the beginning of things and their last end, and especially of rational creatures."[5] This supernatural knowledge allows humans to direct their thoughts and actions to God "more fitly and surely" than they could under their natural powers, leading them more certainly to the end for which they were made.[6]

This argument is foundational to Aquinas's entire theology, but it

1. The most influential account of this theme is found in Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas,* trans. A. M. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964). For a discussion of this idea and its reception in Thomism, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas,* vol. 1: *The Person and His Work,* rev. ed., trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), pp. 150-56.

2. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 1. Throughout this essay, citations are taken from *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas,* 2 vols., ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945). For a helpful account of the history of the interpretation of the concept of sacred doctrine in this question, see James A. Weisheipl, "The Meaning of *Sacra Doctrina* in *Summa theologiae* I, Q1," *The Thomist* 38 (1974): 49-80.

3. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 1.

4. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2.

5. *ST* I, q. 2, prologue.

6. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 1.

raises two immediate questions: *why* and *how?* Specifically, why should humans accept this account, and how does it make sense? If humans really were made *for* God, then why is it the case their natural reason does not suffice to lead them to God? And if the knowledge provided by sacred doctrine really is necessary for humans to reach their true end, then how does this knowledge relate to the knowledge available to humans by use of their natural reason alone? Aquinas knows that, if he is to establish the legitimacy of his claims about the role of sacred doctrine within human life, then he must address these questions in some way. And, in fact, this is precisely what he does in the opening questions of the *ST:* taken together, these questions form a single, coherent argument about the nature of sacred doctrine, its relationship to human reason, and the implications of this relationship for human thought and speech about God. This argument begins with q. 2 and culminates with qq. 12 and 13, where Aquinas establishes the scope and limitations of natural reason and offers a theory for how human concepts that originally arose from reasoned reflection upon creation are rightly applied to God as well. The result is a comprehensive account of the critical yet ongoing relationship between the supernaturally revealed truths of faith and the truths of natural reason, one that allows Aquinas to explain how finite creatures can stand in relationship with, and talk correctly about, the infinite God for whom they were made. This account addresses the "why" and "how" questions and thus provides the foundation upon which the rest of his arguments in the *ST* are built. It also, more relevant to our purposes, helps us see precisely how Aquinas understands the role of natural revelation in Christian theology, which sets the stage for a comparison of his views with those of Karl Barth.

Sacred Doctrine and Natural Reason

When the opening questions of the *ST* are read together as a coherent unit, the logic of Aquinas's argument in them is fairly easy to follow.[7] To establish the claims he made about the necessity and role of sacred

7. The argument below concerning the unity and relationship between these questions is drawn from the interpretation found in Anna Bonta Moreland, *Known by Nature: Thomas Aquinas on the Natural Knowledge of God* (New York: Crossroads, 2010), pp. 47-65, 133-34.

doctrine in q. 1, Aquinas needs to provide an account of how sacred doctrine and natural reason relate to one another. Before he can delineate this relationship, however, he has to have a clear account of the difference between the content of the knowledge provided by sacred doctrine and reason respectively. With this goal in mind, Aquinas begins his argument in q. 2 by addressing the question of whether or not God's existence can be demonstrated rationally. Once he has made this case, he then outlines three tasks he must accomplish: "we must consider (1) how [God] is *not;* (2) how He is known by us; and (3) how He is named."[8] These tasks provide a summary of what Aquinas believes he must show in order to explain the relationship between sacred doctrine and human reason. First, he needs to show precisely what humans can know about God by reason alone by describing the positive knowledge of God that can be derived from natural reason alone (qq. 3-11); then he has to explain the scope, nature, and limits of this natural knowledge of God as compared to the knowledge available in and through faith, as well as the relationship between the two types of knowledge (q. 12); and finally, he needs to provide an account of human speech about God in light of his conclusions about the relationship between faith and reason (q. 13). Taken together, these arguments explain how true statements about God made by those both inside and outside of faith relate to one another. Aquinas believes this relationship will confirm the claims about sacred doctrine made in q. 1.

His argument begins with his proofs for God's existence in q. 2. There he establishes that, although God's existence is not self-evident, because humans were made for God, the capacity to know *that* God exists is "in a general and confused way implanted in [humans] by nature."[9] This latent capacity for God needs to be actualized, and this actualization can occur by means of an argument. To this end, Aquinas claims that the existence of any cause can be established by examining the effects it produces, since "from every effect the existence of its proper cause can be demonstrated."[10] Since humans have direct knowledge of the created effects produced by God, it must be possible to "demonstrate the existence of God from His effects."[11] This is precisely

8. *ST* I, q. 3, prologue.
9. *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1.
10. *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2.
11. *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3.

what his five proofs for God's existence demonstrate: they show that God is the First Cause of everything that exists.[12] Knowledge of God's existence does not rise to the level of sacred doctrine, however, because sacred doctrine discusses God "as He is in Himself."[13] Can humans acquire *this* kind of knowledge from reason alone? Aquinas himself sets up this question: "When the existence of a thing has been ascertained, there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence."[14] He immediately admits that such knowledge cannot be attained directly by humans, because finite humans "have no means for considering how God is" in God's essence.[15] This does not mean that human reason has reached its limits, however. Aquinas believes he can demonstrate that, by using reason to discern what God is *not* and then by reflecting upon the content of this negative knowledge, humans can indirectly arrive at additional, although qualified and limited, *positive* knowledge of God.

Here Aquinas turns to the first part of his threefold outline and to the doctrine of divine simplicity, because he thinks this doctrine can be used to mark off the limits of what humans can know of God's being by natural reason alone. He argues that on the basis of their knowledge that God is the First Cause of everything that exists, humans can also know that "God is His own being." From this point, they can deduce that God's being is *simple* — which is to say that God is *not* composite, his essence and existence are identical, and he does not have his being by participation in anything else.[16] These characteristics distinguish God from every created thing, since essence and existence are not identical in creatures, creatures are composite, and they have their being by participation.[17] For Aquinas, this divine-human distinction, worked out by means of the doctrine of divine simplicity, constitutes the basic limits of what humans can know about God by reason. In qq. 4-11, he simply draws out the implications of this distinction more fully: since humans can know that God's being is simple, they also can deduce that God is

12. *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3.
13. *ST* I, q. 2, prologue.
14. *ST* I, q. 3, prologue.
15. *ST* I, q. 3, prologue.
16. *ST* I, q. 3, a. 4.
17. See *ST* I, q. 44, a. 1: "all beings other than God are not their own being, but are beings by participation. Therefore, it must be that all things . . . are caused by the one First Being, Who possesses being most perfectly."

not imperfect, evil, finite, changeable, limited by time, or composite.[18] Even though these deductions have been derived solely from the negative knowledge of God available by reason alone, Aquinas believes they actually produce *positive* claims about God's being. In other words, as he explains at the end of his examination of these questions, by ruling out characteristics associated with creatures, humans can use their natural reason to know *something* true about God "as He is in Himself."[19] This knowledge of God is not as perfect or full as the knowledge found in sacred doctrine, but it remains true knowledge nonetheless.[20]

This insight brings us back to the original question: What is the relationship between true claims about God derived through the use of natural reason and the true claims about God given to the human in faith? It is here that Aquinas turns to the second of the three tasks he outlined: explaining precisely *how* humans know God both by reason and through faith. This explanation occurs in q. 12, where he proceeds by comparing the content of the knowledge of God that humans will have in the final beatitude — when they will see God "as He is" (1 John 3:2) — to the knowledge of God available to their natural reason in the present that he has just delineated in qq. 2-11. Aquinas thinks this comparison will make the distinction between the two types of knowledge clear and thus set the stage for a discussion of their relationship.

18. This insight comes from Moreland, who argues that, taken together, qq. 3-11 "represent a systematic attempt to reject all idolatrous tendencies to place God into a class with creatures." See Moreland, *Known by Nature,* p. 65.

19. *ST* I, q. 12, prologue. Hence, I disagree with Bruce Marshall's claim that Aquinas "effectively rules out natural theology (unless, of course, it is practiced by Christians)." As we will see, the content of natural theology is certainly qualified on Aquinas's view, but it is not ruled out. See Marshall, "*Quod Scit Una Uetula:* Aquinas on the Nature of Theology," in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas,* ed. Rik van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 18.

20. This claim was not new for Aquinas. For example, in his commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate,* he argued that humans "cannot know *that* a thing is without knowing in some way *what* it is, either perfectly or at least confusedly. . . . For our knowledge of definitions, like that of demonstrations, must begin with some previous knowledge. Similarly, therefore, we cannot know *that* God and other immaterial substances exist unless we know somehow, in some confused way, *what* they are." See Aquinas, *The Division and Method of the Sciences: Questions V and VI of His Commentary on the* De Trinitate *of Boethius,* trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986), VI, a. 3. This remark was originally cited by Moreland, who notes that Aquinas "maintains this same vocabulary" in *ST* I, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1. See Moreland, *Known by Nature,* pp. 62, 173.

He begins by arguing that it must be possible for a created intellect to "see the essence of God," since a denial of this possibility would mean that humans could "never attain to beatitude."[21] In light of this claim, five successive questions arise. First, what does it *mean* to "see God" in this way? Aquinas answers that it cannot mean that the human "comprehends" God, since something is comprehended when it is "perfectly known," and an infinite God can never be perfectly known by a finite being.[22] Instead, it means that the beatified "attain" God in the sense that God is always present to them, and they "enjoy Him as the ultimate fulfillment of desire."[23] This answer leads to the second question: *How* can a human "see God" in this way? Aquinas responds by saying that humans cannot do so by nature, because anything that is known always must be known in accord with the nature of the knower. Since God's infinite being exceeds the finite nature of the human knower, knowledge of God's essence is by definition "beyond the natural power of any created intellect." Indeed, only *God* is capable of knowing himself in this way because "to know self-subsistent being is natural to the divine intellect alone." Aquinas thus concludes that humans can "see God" only when "God by His grace unites Himself to the created intellect, as an object made intelligible to it."[24] This union takes the form of a "supernatural disposition" added to the human's natural capacities when God unites himself to her by grace so that she can

21. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1.

22. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 7. He notes that this inability to comprehend God does not mean that God is incomprehensible because "anything of Him is not seen," but because this kind of hiddenness would undermine the very idea of a final beatitude. Rather, God's incomprehensibility means that God is "not seen as perfectly as He is capable of being seen" because only *God* knows himself as fully as he is capable of being known. See *ST* I, q. 12, a. 7, ad 2; also see *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, ad 3.

23. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 7, ad 1. Aquinas uses this distinction to develop an important point in *ST* I, q. 12, a. 8: in their vision of the divine essence, beatified humans do not see "all that God does or can do" because this would be to comprehend God; rather, even in the beatific vision, God is known "as an effect is seen in its cause," meaning that this knowledge is inexhaustible in the sense that it *always* can be more fully realized. For a more thorough account of this distinction between "comprehend God" *(comprehendere Deum)* and "attain God" *(attingere Deum),* see Moreland, *Known by Nature,* pp. 75-85, 152-53.

24. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 4. Aquinas notes that, in this life, humans are "united to him as to one unknown," because they cannot "see God" until their beatitude. Even so, they can acquire more perfect knowledge than could be obtained by reason, such as the fact that God is triune. See *ST* I, q. 13, a. 13, ad 1.

achieve what otherwise would be impossible.[25] This insight raises the third question: Is the vision of God available to humans through grace *also* available to humans through nature? Aquinas's answer is no. Since the knowledge of a thing always corresponds to the nature of the knower, and since the human is a corporeal being whose "natural knowledge begins from sense," human natural knowledge "can go as far as it can be led by sensible things." Since the human "cannot be led by sense so far as to see the essence of God," the human cannot see God by nature in the same way that God will be seen when he unites himself to the human by grace in the final beatitude.[26] This conclusion leads to the fourth question: If the human cannot see God's essence by nature, what *can* be known of God by nature? In response, Aquinas summarizes the limited content of this natural knowledge:

> But because [the sensible effects of God] are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God whether He exists, and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him as the First Cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him. Hence, we know His relationship with creatures, that is, that He is the cause of all things; also that creatures differ from Him inasmuch as He is not in any way part of what is caused by Him; and that His effects are removed from Him, not by reason or any defect on His part, but because He superexceeds them all.[27]

This summary corresponds precisely to the content of the arguments about God that Aquinas had just offered in qq. 2-11. These questions, therefore, stand as his description of what can be known of God by natural reason alone, and Aquinas has now distinguished this knowledge from the knowledge that is available by grace and faith.[28]

With this distinction in hand, Aquinas can now address the fifth and final question: What is the *relationship* between the knowledge of God available through grace and the knowledge of God available to humans by nature? This question marks an important point in Aquinas's argument, because it returns to the questions initially raised in the light of his claims about the purpose and role of sacred doctrine within human life. His answer is to say that the knowledge of God given to humans by grace is "more perfect" than the knowledge of God available by natural reason.[29] The chief reason is that, because it is limited to sensible things, the knowledge of God available to natural reason is partial at best and may be incorrect at worst. This explains why, when reason alone is used, God is "known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors."[30] Sacred doctrine is necessary, therefore, because it provides humans with the "fuller knowledge" of God they need "to express divine things better" and order their lives rightly.[31]

This conclusion does not mean that human reason has no role to play in the way that humans know God, however. Indeed, Aquinas has just shown that, by using their natural reason alone, humans can and do say *true* things about God. Even though sacred doctrine is "more perfect" than natural knowledge, therefore, it does not replace it altogether. Aquinas explains that, while the knowledge of God available through grace "belongs only to the good," the knowledge of God available through natural reason "can belong to both good and bad."[32] This means that the two types of knowledge stand in an intrinsic and ongoing relationship with one another, with the type that is always good (sacred doctrine) being used to perfect and fulfill the one that may contain errors (natural reason). This conclusion addresses the question lingering after q. 1, and its logic is straightforward. While we must say that the knowledge of God available in sacred doctrine surpasses the limits of human reason, we cannot say this knowledge *contradicts* human reason, because doing so would undermine the claim that humans can naturally know that God exists as the First Cause of creation and that God's being is simple and thus distinct from every created thing. A denial of this claim would contradict the presupposition with which Aquinas started: humans are rational beings naturally ordered to God. Even though sacred doctrine proceeds from higher principles,

25. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 5. Aquinas calls this disposition a "kind of deiformity." See *ST* I, q. 12, a. 6.

26. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 12.

27. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 12.

28. In line with this claim, Moreland argues this question can be read as a "retrospective analysis" consisting of "a pause and reflection on the methodology of the previous questions." See Moreland, *Known by Nature*, pp. 65-66.

29. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 13.

30. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 1.

31. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 13; also see *ST* I, q. 12, a. 13, ad 2.

32. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 12, ad 3.

it is still a *science* that functions according to reason.[33] Natural reason may lead only to limited and partial knowledge of God, but this knowledge is *true* knowledge inasmuch as everything reasonable is intrinsically ordered to the wisdom of God.[34] The knowledge of God available through reason, therefore, must be seen as the preamble and presupposition of the knowledge of God available through sacred doctrine rather than its opposite.[35]

Speaking about God

This account of the relationship between sacred doctrine and natural reason brings Aquinas to the third and final task in his threefold outline: offering a description of human speech about God. He explains that, since "everything is named according to our knowledge of it," human language for God must correspond to the way humans know God through both natural reason and sacred doctrine.[36] Yet the problem facing any such account is that, since God's essence "is above all that we understand about God and signify in words," God is "above being

33. It should be noted that, even though Aquinas affirms that sacred doctrine is a science (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 2), he qualifies this claim by saying that, because it does not proceed from the "vision of the believer, but from the vision of Him Who is believed," it finally "falls short of the nature which knowledge has when it is science." In other words, while sacred doctrine is a science in the sense that it proceeds from first principles, it is a distinct science because it arrives at its first principles, not through reason, but "from the uniting of our intellect with God through grace." See *ST* I, q. 12, a. 13, ad 3.

34. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 1. This conclusion rules out Eugene Rogers's argument that, for Aquinas, "'the natural cognition of God' is presented as a misnomer." Overall, Rogers's argument about the convergence between Aquinas and Barth fails to do justice to either figure, since it is derived from both the misplaced idea that Aquinas denies positive natural knowledge of God and an interpretation of Barth that corresponds to his early position on natural revelation rather than the modified, later view that will be discussed below. See Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 131.

35. *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1. This allows us to conclude, as David Burrell does, that the perfection and fulfillment of reason by faith reveal their fundamentally positive relationship with one another since this perfection "gives direction to reason itself, inviting reason to give expression to its internal orientation to its source and goal." See Burrell, "Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language," in van Nieuwenhove and Wawrykow, eds., *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 79.

36. *ST* I, q. 13, prologue.

named."[37] Human speech about God cannot be equivocal, however, because this would leave it empty and nonfunctional, and humans would be unable to reach the end for which they were created.[38] How, then, can words and concepts originally derived from reflection upon finite created things be rightly applied to an infinite God? Aquinas's answer builds upon the foundation of the previous questions. He argues that since words are "signs of ideas," and since "ideas are the similitudes of things" in the human intellect, humans can "give a name to anything in so far as we can *understand* it."[39] As he demonstrated in the previous questions, even though humans cannot see the essence of God in this life, they can, in fact, "know God from creatures as their cause, and also by way of excellence and remotion."[40] This leads to the conclusion that creaturely concepts derived from reflection upon the created order can be rightly applied to God because God can be known, at least in part, through reflection upon that created order.

Once again, the logic behind this conclusion and its implications is straightforward. Since human words and concepts are derived from reflection upon created effects caused by God, any perfection in these created effects can be traced directly back to God, who possesses it "in a more eminent way."[41] This means the words used to signify creaturely perfections also can be used to "signify the divine substance, but in an imperfect manner."[42] This imperfect correspondence stems from the distinction between the thing signified and the mode of signification: even though creaturely words rightly apply to God, they do not apply to him "properly or strictly" because they apply differently to God as the First Cause than they do to the creaturely effects.[43] God thus remains beyond the limits of human language just like knowledge of God's essence always remains beyond the grasp of

37. *ST* I, q. 13, a. 1, ad 1.

38. See *ST* I, q. 13, a. 5.

39. *ST* I, q. 13, a. 1.

40. *ST* I, q. 13, a. 1.

41. *ST* I, q. 13, a. 2, ad 2. Aquinas explains that our concepts for God rightly apply to God first, and only then to creatures, because they exist in God in a more excellent way since he is their cause. See *ST* I, q. 13, a. 6.

42. *ST* I, q. 13, a. 2.

43. *ST* I, q. 13, a. 3. In a certain sense, as Gregory Rocca argues, this distinction can be seen as "an encapsulation of the whole expanse of Aquinas' positive and negative theology." See Gregory Rocca, O.P., *Speaking the Incomprehensible God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), pp. 349-52.

human reason.[44] This limitation does not disqualify creaturely concepts from being applied to God, but simply qualifies them in a similar way to how the knowledge of God available through natural reason is qualified by sacred doctrine. While it is right to say human concepts can be "predicated substantially of God," therefore, we also must say that these concepts "fall short of representing Him."[45] A human employing only natural reason is able to say true things about God because the concepts she uses, derived from her reflection upon the created order, can and sometimes do rightly apply to God. Even so, the picture of God she obtains in this way is not adequate to lead her to her true end, because it is at best partial and may be incorrect. This shows again why sacred doctrine is necessary: the concepts derived from natural reason have a role to play in human speech about God, but they must be refined by the supernatural knowledge found in sacred doctrine. This knowledge unveils the more perfect meaning and content of our concepts about God because it works from a clearer picture of God "as He is in Himself," meaning it works from the basis of a fuller account of the meaning and content of the perfections that the created effects only imperfectly represent. In short, since the concepts humans apply to God were originally derived from reflection upon these created effects, they need to be refined and reinterpreted in the light of the truths provided by sacred doctrine. The true meaning of human language about God thus has to be unveiled to humans, and this unveiling happens by grace.[46]

This account of theological language completes Aquinas's argument and addresses the question of why and how it makes sense to say that, even though humans are rational beings made for God, they still need sacred doctrine in order to reach God as their true end. This establishes the claims made in q. 1 and provides the foundation for the rest of Aquinas's argument in the *ST*. More central to our purposes,

44. See *ST* I, q. 13, a. 1: God "can be named by us from creatures, yet not so that the name which signifies Him expresses the divine essence in itself."

45. *ST* I, q. 13, a. 2. He draws this conclusion more succinctly later on: "In this life, we cannot know the essence of God as it is in himself, but we know it according as it is represented in the perfections of creatures; and it is thus that the names imposed by us signify it." See *ST* I, q. 13, a. 2, ad 3.

46. On this basis, Aquinas argues that "a pagan can take this name 'God' in the same way when he says 'an idol is God' as the Catholic does in saying 'an idol is *not* God.'" See *ST* I, q. 13, a. 10, ad 5.

this argument also supplies a clear account of how Aquinas understands the relationship between natural revelation, human reason, and sacred doctrine. We turn now to Karl Barth's mature account of this same relationship in order to set up a comparison between them.

Karl Barth on Natural Revelation

Just as the opening questions of Aquinas's *ST* can be interpreted correctly only when they are read together as a unit, Barth's view of the relationship between natural revelation, human reason, and Christian theology can be interpreted correctly only when it is seen within the context of his entire theological development. The complicated reality is that some of Barth's early statements about this relationship are qualified in substantive ways by later developments and changes in his theology. A right assessment of Barth's views must account for these developments, and this means that some of his early claims must be reinterpreted in light of his later, more qualified, view.[47] This insight puts us in position to acquire a newfound clarity, because it will help us see that, while Barth and Aquinas share several key theological values and points of convergence in their approach to natural revelation and human reason, key differences remain, although the nature of these differences shifts between the early and later parts of Barth's career.

Developments in Barth's Thought

Like Aquinas, the early Barth holds that every creature is determined by its relationship with God, that God and God's relationship with creation must be described so that God's transcendence is maintained, and that accounts of human reason and language must be carefully formed so as to not constrain God within creaturely limits. Barth, however, adds an additional emphasis to these affirmations: not only is hu-

47. For a full account of these developments as they relate to Barth's dialogue with Roman Catholicism, see Keith L. Johnson, "A Reappraisal of Barth's Theological Development and His Dialogue with Catholicism," *International Journal for Systematic Theology* 14, no. 1 (January 2012): 3-25. The interpretation of Barth offered here presupposes the argument about Barth's development made in that essay.

man reason limited and confused with respect to its ability to know God apart from grace, it has been so twisted by sin that the human inevitably attempts to transform the revelation she receives into an idol.[48] Aquinas, of course, accounts for the consequences of sin upon human reason as well, but he does not allow these consequences to become the primary lens through which he views the relationship between reason, faith, and theology. This is precisely what Barth does. He argues that the person and work of Jesus Christ determine both the human relationship with God *and* all human knowledge of God. Humans cannot come to accurate knowledge of God through other sources, such as through reflection upon the created order, because sin has left them unable to receive or interpret this revelation without distorting it. While knowledge of God from God's revelation in creation may be "a possibility in principle," therefore, it is never "a possibility to be realized" because "between what is possible in principle and what is possible in fact there inexorably lies the Fall."[49] Sin has so affected human reason that insights derived from reasoned reflection upon creation cannot be put to "positive use in theology either antecedently *or* subsequently ('in faith')."[50] The revelation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ in Scripture is thus the *only* basis from which humans can know God or speak accurately about God both before and after faith because this Word is the only one that accounts for reality and the implications of human sin.

Barth's construal of this approach, however, contains a fatal flaw: it proceeds as if *no* intrinsic relationship between God and humans exists after the Fall.[51] Two problems follow from this idea. First, this view closes the door to the possibility that words and concepts derived from reflection upon the created order can be rightly applied to God as well, because if there is no intrinsic connection between their normal use

48. John Calvin's remark that the human heart is a "factory for idols" was formative for Barth on this point. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.11, as well as Barth's interpretation of Calvin's argument in "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," in *Natural Theology*, ed. John Baillie (London: The Centenary Press, 1946), pp. 94-109.

49. Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," p. 106.

50. Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," p. 108.

51. David Bentley Hart raises this point in his critique of Barth's doctrine of analogy. Although this critique may apply to the early Barth in some form, it most definitely does not apply to the mature Barth, as will be shown below. See Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 241-42.

and their use with respect to God, then there is no way to know what creaturely words and concepts actually *mean* when they are applied to God. In other words, by failing to establish some kind of intrinsic yet analogous connection between everyday human words and the words of divine revelation – as Aquinas does in his account – Barth makes human talk about God functionally equivocal.[52] Barth himself eventually recognized this problem because later he argues that, when humans speak about God, their words cannot "be alienated from their proper and original sense usage" since this would "attribute to our views, concepts, and words a purely fictional capacity, so that the use we make of them is always hedged in by the reservation of an 'as if.'" He thus concludes that "a relationship of analogy, of similarity, of partial correspondence and agreement" must exist between human words and their use with respect to God, but he insists that, due to the reality of sin, this analogy only occurs *in faith*.[53] This leads to the second problem: Barth's claims about the role of faith in divine revelation, salvation, and theology actually *assume* the existence of precisely the kind of intrinsic relationship between God and creation he believes sin has ruled out. For example, in *Church Dogmatics* I/1, Barth concedes that there must be "something common to the speaking God and the hearing person" in order for God's revelation to the human to take place.[54] He insists, however, that this common feature is "real only in faith," because "that which by creation was possible for [the human] in relation to God has been lost by the Fall."[55] This "analogy of faith" thus exists only as an extrinsic capacity made available to humans in and through their participation in Christ by grace.[56] Barth's critics, however, pointed out that this approach assumes that faith and being can be op-

52. For a critique of Barth on this point, see Jay Wesley Richard, "Barth on the Divine 'Conscription' of Language," *Heythrop Journal* 38, no. 3 (1997): 247-66.

53. *CD* II/1, pp. 227-28. Throughout, all citations of the *CD* are to Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 parts, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-75).

54. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/1 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1932), p. 251, translation mine. Cf. *CD* I/1, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. 236.

55. Barth, *CD* I/1, p. 239.

56. Barth's argument here is essentially the epistemological application of the Protestant doctrines of *sola gratia, sola fide, participatio Christi,* and *simul iustus et peccator.* He labels the common feature shared between God and humanity the "capacity of the incapable," a "miracle that cannot be interpreted anthropologically" but one that nevertheless is a "real capacity which is already actualized in faith" (*CD* I/1, p. 241).

posed to one another.[57] Such opposition is false because it contradicts Barth's claims about salvation, given the fact that a participation "in Christ" is a participation in *being* — namely, *God's* being in and through Christ.[58] Barth's claims about revelation and faith are possible, therefore, only because they *presuppose* the existence of an intrinsic and analogous relationship of being between God and humans. Barth later concedes this point by admitting that he "can only observe that there is every justification for the warning that participation in being is grounded in the grace of God and therefore in faith," and he must "take heed to this warning and comply with it."[59] This admission, however, when combined with the first one, fatally undermines his insistence that insights obtained through human reflection upon created realities cannot be used in theology.

The problem is that, by conceding that any account of divine revelation has to explain how the meaning of the words and concepts originally derived from human reflection upon creation relate to the meaning of these same words and concepts as they are applied to God — and by conceding that this relationship, even though it is finally determined by faith and grace, actually presupposes an already-existing, intrinsic relationship of being between God and the human — Barth effectively concedes that his earlier claims that natural revelation can have no positive role in theology are void. After all, if an account of human speech about God *requires* an intrinsic relationship between created human language and divine revelation, and if such an account necessarily presupposes an ongoing relationship of being between God and humans, then one cannot also say that sin fundamentally disrupts this relationship and thus the human ability to think and speak correctly about God on the basis of their created nature, because this would be to deny the very presupposition that makes human speech about God possible. Such speech may be confused or limited in scope because of sin, of course, but it cannot be made *impossible* by it. This means Barth's early claims rejecting any role for natural revelation in theology must be revised to ac-

57. On this point, see the critique by Gottlieb Söhngen in "Analogia Fidei. Gottähnlichkeit allein aus Glauben?" *Catholica* 3, no. 3 (1934): 120. This critique was later picked up by Hans Urs von Balthasar in *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation,* trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

58. See Söhngen, "Analogia Fidei," pp. 131-33.

59. Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 82. He thus concludes that "substance and actuality must be brought into this right relationship."

count for this possibility. As Barth considered this fact, he faced a quandary. He could not retreat from his most basic convictions because he still affirmed the depth and reality of human sin and still believed that Jesus Christ is determinative not only for human salvation but for all correct knowledge of God. At the same time, he now recognized that he could not establish these claims on the basis of the idea that sin has fundamentally ruptured the relationship between God and humans; rather, he must establish these claims while *also* affirming that humans stand in an intrinsic relationship with God by virtue of their creation by God, a relationship that is *not* fundamentally disrupted by sin. The problem was how to formulate such an account.

Barth's solution is striking in its simplicity: he says that the created order itself, and thus created human being as such, is a function of God's decision to reconcile sinful humans in and through Jesus Christ. This answer arrives in full form with Barth's doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2, where he claims that Jesus Christ is both the subject and object of election and thus the beginning and end of creation. On the ground of this claim, he argues that the entire created order is determined in its inner depths by God's decision to enter into covenant with sinful humans in and through the person and work of Christ. This covenant *is* God's grace, and thus "there is no such thing as a created nature which has its purpose, being or continuance apart from grace, or which may be known in this purpose, being or continuance except through grace."[60] In other words, the created order is intrinsically defined by the covenant, because it exists precisely in order to be the space where the covenant is executed.[61] The same holds true for human being. Every human is intrinsically defined by the covenant because Jesus Christ himself is the ontological ground of human existence, and true human being is found only in him. "It is not that [God] first wills and works the being of the world and [the human], and then ordains [the human] for salvation," he says. "But God creates, preserves and over-rules [the human] for this *prior* end and with this *prior* purpose, that there may be a being distinct from himself ordained for salvation, for perfect being, for participation in his own being."[62] What

60. *CD* II/2, p. 92.

61. The covenant thus serves as creation's "material presupposition." See *CD* III/1, p. 232. For Barth's discussion of the relationship between creation and covenant, see *CD* III/1, pp. 42-329.

62. *CD* IV/1, p. 9.

humans are *intrinsically* is determined at every moment by their relationship to Christ, who as the fully human and fully divine mediator, also remains utterly *distinct* from them in his unique relation to the Father. This means that, while Barth can say that humans have an intrinsic capacity for God, he also can hold that this capacity is established outside of their own being *(extra nos)* because it resides in Jesus Christ himself. A relationship of ongoing continuity between God and humanity exists, therefore, but only because both the created order and human being itself presuppose the *prior* existence of God's covenant of grace. Human sin does not fundamentally alter this covenant because the reconciliation of sin is included within God's eternal covenantal decision, the very divine decision that defines both the being of creation and humanity as such. Sin can thus be acknowledged in its full depth and reality without also making it determinative for the human relationship with or knowledge of God.[63]

This account solves the problem Barth faced in light of his earlier claims, but more significantly for our purposes, it also opens the door for a qualified embrace of natural revelation. Specifically, Barth now can explain how words and concepts originally derived from human reflection upon the created order relate to words and concepts used in God's special revelation: they stand in an analogous relationship to one another because both the created order and human being itself are intrinsically determined by God's covenantal relationship to them. As humans derive words and concepts from their reflection upon created realities, these words and concepts reflect the fact that creation itself is ontologically determined by God's covenant with humanity in Jesus Christ and thus always stands in relationship with God through Christ. Of course, humans cannot understand the nature of their relationship or *how* their words relate to God apart from the specific revelation of the covenant found in Scripture. They are intrinsically capable of receiving this revelation, however, because "something common" exists between God and humanity: Jesus Christ, the fully divine and fully human mediator. This "point of contact" in Christ means that an intrinsic analogy of being exists between God and humans, but this analogy is grounded in God's

63. For a fuller discussion of these ideas and their implications in light of Barth's mature theology, see John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 59-98. Also see Keith L. Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), pp. 191-230.

eternal electing decision rather than his act of creation, and ultimately, it is grounded in Christ himself.[64] This allows Barth to say that God's self-revelation in Christ is absolutely determinative for human knowledge of God while *also* affirming that everyday human language can be rightly applied to God. He thus can affirm a role for natural revelation and human reason within the church's theology even though this role always remains qualified by the fact that humans only know the true meaning and purpose of creation or their own being when it is unveiled to them by grace through their reception of the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

Natural Revelation in Covenant

Barth displays his embrace of this qualified role for natural revelation most closely in the opening section of *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1.[65] There he argues that, since both creation in general and human being in particular are defined by the covenant that takes place in and through Jesus Christ, any account of God's revelation to humans through the created order must begin from a Christological basis and take a Christological form.[66] This basis is the Bible's account of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and the form corresponds to Christ's prophetic office, which describes the risen Christ's work to make the reconciliation accomplished in him "concretely active and perceptible" within human history through the power of his Holy Spirit.[67] Barth explains that to deal with

64. For more on this claim, see Keith L. Johnson, "Reconsidering Barth's Rejection of Przywara's *analogia entis*," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 4 (October 2010): 642-46.

65. See *CD* IV/3.1, pp. 3-165. Since this volume represents Barth's mature thought on these matters, all of his prior statements about these matters are qualified by what he also says here.

66. See *CD* IV/3.1, p. 38: "As the reconciliation is his work, so is its revelation, in its past and present and future occurrence. As the reconciliation takes place in him, its revelation takes place through him. It does not take place, therefore cannot be understood, apart from him or in any way in itself. For this reason, we have to begin with him." Barth's logic here is straightforward: since the one order of God is the order of reconciliation, everything that occurs within the created order must be understood in the light of this work, meaning that it must be interpreted in light of Jesus Christ. Or, as he puts it later: "As Jesus Christ lives, God and man live in this conjunction. We do not have God here and man there; God is the God of man and man the man of God. This is the epitome of the whole order of creation" (p. 43).

67. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 10.

Jesus Christ is to deal "with the presence and action of God." Wherever God is present and active, there is "not just possibly or secondarily, but definitely and primarily, *declaration,* and therefore light, truth, Word and glory."[68] Since Christ is present and active throughout the entire created order which is intrinsically defined by him, it must be the case that he can and does declare himself in and through this order. It is "perhaps incontestable," Barth says, "that there are real lights of life and words of God in this sphere too, that He alone is the Word of God even here, and that these lights shine only because of the shining of none other light than His [light]."[69] This order cannot directly be identified with Christ, but rather, it is simply the "theater and setting for His being, activity and speech."[70] This adds an important qualification: not *everything* in creation reveals Christ. While Christ can and does take up created realities to declare himself through them, the created order has "its own light and truths and therefore its own speech and words" that are distinct from this revelation.[71] While natural revelation is both possible and actual, therefore, the church must carefully test the truths it receives from nature before it accepts them as truly revelatory of God. The criterion of this testing is "the whole context of the biblical message as centrally determined and characterized by Jesus Christ."[72]

For Barth, three implications immediately follow from this claim. First, since insights drawn from natural revelation can only be critically appropriated by the church, they "cannot be combined" with the revelation of Christ to form "a system superior to both Him and them."[73]

68. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 79. He says: "A mute and obscure God would be an idol. The true and living God is eloquent and radiant."

69. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 96.

70. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 137. Barth appeals here to Calvin's formula that the created order is the *theatrum gloriae Dei,* where creation is seen as being "specifically called into being in the beginning and as itself the beginning of all things, to be the theatre and setting, the location and background, of the ordinary and extraordinary mediation of [Christ's] life and work."

71. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 139. This means that creation "shines, speaks, and attests for itself," but this speaking is "its own revelation, i.e., those of the creation or created order itself" (p. 140).

72. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 126.

73. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 101. Here Barth reveals that his early concern about the human tendency toward idolatry lingers: "however illuminating, necessary or successful they may be . . . all these [systems] imply a control over Him to which none of us has any right."

In other words, since creation is intrinsically determined by the covenant, the content of natural revelation must be tested and interpreted by Scripture's account of the covenant rather than the other way around. This ordered relationship leads to the second implication: since any natural revelation is Christ's *own* revelation, it can be seen as a true revelation only when it corresponds to what *already* has been revealed about Christ in Scripture.[74] Any insights about God, humans, or their relationship derived from human reflection upon the created order must be measured by the Bible's account of Christ's life, death, and resurrection before they are deemed to be true.[75] This means that, just like in Barth's early account, God's revelation in Christ still determines the church's knowledge about who God is, what God is like, and the nature of God's relationship with humanity. The shift lies in Barth's new belief that this scriptural revelation may correspond to what humans can know of God through other means, such as through philosophical reflection upon created realities. He holds that such correspondence exists, however, only because Christ himself has "impelled, ordained and fashioned [these realities] for this function of bearing testimony" to himself.[76] Barth compares this action to Jesus' preaching of parables, where common and everyday realities were "likened unto" the kingdom of God for those who had "ears to hear" (Matt. 4:9). The resurrected Christ does the same thing *now* in the service of the same goal: through the power of his Spirit, he uses created realities to testify to the truth about God and God's relationship with humanity. Christ, however, is the one speaking here — not the created realities "likened

74. See *CD* IV/3.1, p. 98: "He is not the only word, not even the only good word. But he is the only word which, because it is spoken directly by God himself, is good as God is, has the authority and power of God and is to be heard as God himself. He is the only Word which all human words, even the best, can only directly or indirectly attest but not repeat, replace, or rival, so that their own goodness and authority are to be measured by whether or not, and with what fidelity, they are witnesses of this one Word."

75. See *CD* IV/3.1, p. 107: "Many words might speak of the majesty, goodness, severity and mystery of God. . . . They might say helpful things which in their own way many find illuminating and helpful. But none of them says what the life of Jesus Christ says. . . . What other word speaks of the covenant between God and man?"

76. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 112. On this point, see Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation,* p. 92: "Barth is denying that there are two realities, the reality of Christ on the one hand and, on the other hand, the quasi-independent reality of human existence in terms of which Christ's reality has to be made meaningful."

unto" him.[77] This insight leads to the third implication: since Christ is the active agent of the revelation that occurs in and through the created order, the church must be willing to pay attention to this revelation and incorporate the insights it receives from it into the church's own faith and practice. In fact, Barth argues that the church would be "foolish and ungrateful if it closed its ears" to these external insights, since their great benefit is that they proclaim Christ "from a different source and in another tongue."[78] These insights may even serve to "illuminate, accentuate or explain the biblical witness" more clearly for the church within its own particular context, leading it "to preach the one Word of God in its own tongue and manner" better than it could otherwise. A refusal to accept such a gift would be an embrace of the "ossification" of the church, and it would be an effective denial of the reality that the risen Christ works as a living and active agent within the very order that was created *for* him.[79]

In this sense, Barth's acceptance of natural revelation pushes beyond what even Aquinas would endorse: while Aquinas did not believe insights derived from natural reason can or should lead the church to alter its own dogmas, Barth does. He argues that while the insights of natural revelation cannot contradict or supplement Scripture, they may cause the church to rethink its tradition, because the church can "learn something which goes beyond its dogmas and confessions, which is not to be learned directly from them or from its own inner movements, but which it is given by its Lord to learn afresh from without." The church's engagement with the externally derived insights of natural reason may become a powerful force for reform *within* the church, therefore, because they can lead the church, "not to break continuity with the insights of preceding fathers and brethren, but in living obedience to the one Lord of the Church and in the discipleship of the prophets and apostles to take it up and continue it with new responsibility on the basis of better instruction."[80] Barth's rejection of the presuppositions of Aristotelian categories to describe God, as well as his critical embrace of modern philosophical forms within his own

77. *CD* IV/3.1, pp. 112-13. Barth puts it succinctly later in his argument: "They are true words only as they refer back to their origin in the one Word, i.e., as the one true Word, Jesus Christ Himself, declares himself in them" (p. 123).

78. *CD* IV/3.1, pp. 115-16.

79. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 115.

80. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 127.

dogmatic theology, find justification here. As he sees it, his account enables him to promote a radical embrace of external insights within the church while simultaneously increasing the church's dependence on Christ, because his description of this embrace takes the form of the church's turning away from itself and turning toward the criterion of its message, Scripture's testimony about Jesus Christ. That is, since the external insights derived from creation are never self-evident but always are revealed by Christ himself, their existence means that the church always has to delve "more deeply into the given word of the Bible as the authentic attestation of the Word of Jesus Christ Himself" in order to locate and test these insights. This leads to the "strengthening, extending and defining of the Christian knowledge which draws from this source and is measured by this norm, to the lending of new seriousness and cheerfulness to the Christian life and new freedom and concentration to the delivery of the Christian message."[81] The church's engagement with the insights of natural revelation and reason, therefore, becomes a life-giving enterprise for the church, one that takes the form of a "history of [the church's] overruling, preservation and continual reformation by the One to whom it belongs."[82] In this way, as Barth sees it, God constantly uses nature to help the church adhere more closely to grace.

This account shows just how much Barth's mature approach to natural revelation has shifted from his early position: he has moved from a posture of hostility to one of "thoughtful inclusion," with his vision for a church that "challenges and relativises" the truths of natural reason as well as "institutes and integrates" them into its faith and practice.[83] The integrity of the created order is maintained because it is viewed as a distinct reality with its own truths. At the same time, since the created order exists "to be the fitting sphere and setting for

81. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 134.

82. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 130. Such a path could be followed on Aquinas's terms, although he himself did not travel it. One would need to begin with Aquinas's argument about human claims about God with respect to the incarnate Christ in *ST* III, q. 16, and then follow out the implications of this argument with respect to Aquinas's doctrine of God. For a discussion of Aquinas's Christological argument in light of his earlier doctrine of analogy, see Bruce D. Marshall, "Christ the End of Analogy," in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* ed. Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 280-313.

83. *CD* IV/3.1, pp. 152-53.

the great acts in which God expresses and declares himself," it always is seen in the light of God's covenant of grace in the person and work of Christ.[84] This critical posture does not diminish but *elevates* creation, because it allows creation's true status within God's eternal plan to be recognized. This means "the being and existence of creation itself is glorified rather than destroyed by the events of which it is ordained to be the theater, so its words and truths, far from being contradicted or given the lie, acquire in this context and in harmony with God's definitive Word, a similar final force and value and significance."[85] In other words, Barth also holds that grace does not destroy but perfects and fulfills nature, but he understands this idea differently than Aquinas would, because for Barth, nature is "taken, lifted, assumed and integrated into the action of God's self-giving and self-declaring to [humanity] and therefore to the world made by Him."[86] It is in this precise sense that creation can be said to "declare the glory of God" and "proclaim the work of his hands" (Ps. 19:1). It does so as it participates in the ministry of the Word, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Aquinas and Barth in Dialogue

With the above account in hand, we now are in position to examine points of convergence and divergence between Aquinas and Barth on the issues of natural revelation, human reason, and Christian theology. Both Aquinas and Barth believe that God reveals himself in the created order and that this revelation is a function of God's relationship with creatures in the sense that this natural revelation is not random but ordered to its fulfillment in grace through Christ. They disagree, however, about the nature of this fulfillment and Christ's role within it. Aquinas views God's relationship with creation through the lens of his *exitus* and *reditus* paradigm, where creatures come forth from God and return to him by means of union with God available through Christ. Thus, he understands the saving work of Christ as an element *within* a more basic order of creation and return. In distinction from this view,

84. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 153.
85. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 164.
86. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 164.

Barth sees God's relationship with humanity as the outworking of God's eternal decision to enter into covenant with humans in Christ, and creation is an element within *this* more basic divine order. Aquinas and Barth both affirm the possibility of natural revelation on the basis of an ordered account of creation's relationship with God, therefore, but their accounts work in reverse from one another. For Aquinas, this ordered relationship exists because God's grace in Christ presupposes the order of nature; for Barth, it exists because the order of nature presupposes God's grace in Christ.

This difference plays itself out in the way each theologian describes the content of natural revelation. For Aquinas, the content of natural revelation is God "as He is in Himself," which is something that can be known in a partial way from the created order just as a cause can be known in a partial way from its effects. In other words, as we have seen, since creation testifies to God as its cause, a human can come to limited and qualified knowledge of God's being and perfections by reasonably reflecting upon the created order itself. For Barth, in contrast, the proper content of natural revelation is God's covenant of grace in Jesus Christ, since the created order finds its being and purpose in God's eternal plan to reconcile humanity in the person and work of Christ. Creation as such cannot reveal this plan, since the created order is simply the "theater" in which the plan is executed.[87] Nor can creation reveal God as its Maker, since this could only lead to "abstract impartations concerning God's existence as the Supreme Being and Ruler of all things" rather than the particular revelation of God in God's covenantal relationship with humanity that is the true referent of theology.[88] Instead, the created order simply testifies to itself, revealing "its *own* lights, words and truths."[89] Creation reveals God *only* when it is taken up in Jesus Christ's own self-revelation, and thus the content of this natural revelation is nothing other than Christ's fulfillment of the covenant. This difference regarding content relates to a difference in how Aquinas and Barth conceive its function and role within Christian theology. Aquinas believes that, since the created order always testifies to God as

87. See Barth, *CD* IV/3.1, p. 149: creation, Barth says, can declare "its mystery in its silence at this point."
88. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 117.
89. *CD* IV/3.1, pp. 140-41: "As the words of terrestrial being [creation's] words are only terrestrial words, and as the truths of terrestrial being they are only terrestrial truths. They are not, then, divine disclosures nor eternal truths."

its cause, natural revelation exists as a basic feature of created existence. This means that humans are always capable of discerning at least some truth about God — such as, for example, the fact that God exists — by the use of their natural reason alone. Barth sees things differently, because for him, the created order reveals God *only* as Christ takes it up in a specific act of self-declaration that occurs through the power of his Holy Spirit. Natural revelation occurs as a unique divine act that *is given* to humans but is not "a given" of human existence.

This distinction leads to interesting points of convergence and divergence between the two thinkers. For example, Aquinas and Barth both agree that Christians and non-Christians can say true things about God. For his part, Aquinas believes that a non-Christian can know *that* things about God are true (as Aristotle did when he knew that God existed, for example) without knowing precisely *how* these things are true (Aristotle did not know that God existed *as triune*). This more perfect knowledge must be unveiled to the human knower, and this occurs when the insights of natural reason are perfected by the insights of sacred doctrine. However, since these truths of natural reason converge with the truths of faith on the basis of an always-existing feature of human existence, they are not replaced or abandoned but simply perfected: faith does not destroy but supports and perfects reason. The payoff of this approach is that reasoned human reflection about God can be systematically coordinated with supernaturally given truths in such a way that these reasoned insights are perfected *without* being fundamentally revised with respect to their original referent. The most obvious example of this approach is Aquinas's own joining of the insights of Aristotelian metaphysics with the Catholic faith: the revelation of the triune God does not overturn Aristotle's picture of the "one God" but *perfects* it because Aristotle actually had the one true God in view all along, even if he only had a limited and partial grasp of God's true being and nature.

Barth's approach is quite different. While he agrees that non-Christians can say true things about God, he also holds that they cannot know either *that* or *how* these things are true apart from knowledge of the covenant. In other words, both the fact *that* their reasoned reflection upon natural revelation is true and *how* it is true can only be known retrospectively from the perspective of faith, since a human can know the truth of the created order or her own human being *only* when she knows that both creation and her own being are determined by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This makes it impossible to

coordinate the truths of natural reason with the truths of the Christian faith without transforming these natural truths so that they function in a different register than they once did. To illustrate: Barth thinks it is quite possible for a philosopher to say something true about God, and it also is possible for the church to incorporate these insights into its theology. In fact, the church would be foolish to ignore such insights, since they might help it better fulfill its mission in its own time and place. The only way that the philosopher or the church can know *that* this philosophical insight is true or *how* it is true, however, is to turn to Scripture and see if it corresponds to the biblical story that finds its center in Jesus Christ. But once this happens, the primary referent of the philosopher's insight has changed because its truth is determined solely by the covenant to which it corresponds rather than the created order from which it was originally derived. This means that, while both Aquinas and Barth believe that fuller and more perfect knowledge of God is unveiled to humans by grace, Barth thinks this unveiling is a much broader enterprise than Aquinas does because he holds that *everything* true that is said about God finally must be measured by what has been revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture. Indeed, *any* truth about God, even those found in philosophy, finally comes from *Christ himself.*

This distinction carries an important implication. If one holds with Aquinas that reasoned reflection upon natural revelation can be systematically coordinated with the revealed truths of the faith as long as its natural insights are on the same trajectory as the insights of faith and thus have the same referent, then it becomes possible to reify certain philosophical approaches, such as the Platonism of the church fathers or Aquinas's own Aristotelianism, as internal to the faith itself. However, if you hold with Barth that the content, nature, and function of reasoned reflection upon God's natural revelation must be measured by the biblical revelation of Christ and can be coordinated with Christ only because Christ himself takes it up in his own self-declaration, then it becomes impossible to permanently link the insights of the faith to any one philosophical system because no philosophical system derived from natural revelation can ever have the biblical story that finds its center in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as its primary referent. Catholic and Protestant distinctions on the relationship between Scripture and tradition, as represented by Aquinas and Barth, have their basis precisely here. Church dogmas and confessions always

are spoken within the idiom of the time and place in which they were composed. If a particular idiom can be made internal to the church's faith, then it becomes possible to make the precise formulations of specific dogmas and confessions infallible and nonrevisable. However, if one always and repeatedly measures the church's dogmas and confessions in the light of that to which they ultimately refer – God in God's relationship with humanity as revealed in Scripture – then it becomes possible to revise these dogmas and confessions, not in order to break continuity with previous formulations, but to adhere better to the same referent within a different time and place. This insight concerning Catholic and Protestant approaches in general also applies to Aquinas and Barth in particular since the same logic applies: the possibility of an ongoing tradition of *Thomism* is included in and with Aquinas's approach, while the possibility of a tradition of *Barthianism* is de facto ruled out by Barth's approach.

All of this shows that the key difference between Aquinas and Barth is not whether natural revelation exists, for on this point, they agree. The question is about the proper content of natural revelation, and by extension, the nature of its role within the church's theology. How one answers this question is determined by how one understands the nature of God's relationship with humanity. Are humans defined primarily by the fact that they were created by God and are destined to return to him through Christ, as Aquinas holds? Or are they defined primarily by God's eternal plan for their reconciliation in the person and work of Jesus Christ, as Barth holds? The stories of creation and salvation are always integrally related, of course, but the story one presupposes as basic to the other determines whether one thinks Aquinas or Barth provides a better option for the integration of nature and grace as well as faith and reason. The key factor in this decision is how one understands the saving work of Jesus Christ in its relationship to creation. Are Christ's life, death, and resurrection an integral part of the more basic story of God's creation of humans and their ordering to him? Or are Christ's life, death, and resurrection the presupposition of creation itself, so that the created order exists precisely to be the place where these things are to take place? Future dialogue between the followers of Aquinas and Barth should begin at precisely these questions because Aquinas's and Barth's divergent answers to them determine their respective accounts of the content of the natural revelation they both embrace, as well as their accounts of God, creation, human being, and salvation.

The Crucified Lord: Thomistic Reflections on the Communication of Idioms and the Theology of the Cross

Thomas Joseph White, O.P.

I

"The princes of this world did not know him; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). Christians assuredly worship and announce the truth of a crucified God, or rather a now-risen Lord who was crucified. The implications of this statement of course affect our understanding of the mystery of God himself. As the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 stated succinctly: "If anyone does not confess that Our Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified in the flesh is true God and the Lord of Glory and one of the Holy Trinity: let him be anathema." Reformulated positively, this means that it constitutes a truth about the very Person of the Son of God, and therefore God himself, that he took flesh and suffered for us. Likewise in a more modern idiom, the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes* 22) states that the Lord "thought with a human mind . . . and loved with a human heart." He did so, however, while being one in substance with the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God.

Based upon this biblical and ecclesiastical confession of the divinity and humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ, classical Christology seeks to offer a plausible understanding of the subject of the communication of idioms: How are we rightly to attribute to Jesus Christ both human and divine properties? If such an ascription implies that the divine and human natures of Christ are united in his Person, how do the deity of God incarnate and his humanity relate to one another? What ontological truths about God and man do such attributions presup-

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