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## Book Review: Faith, Reason, And The Existence Of God

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to revealed knowledge undermines the entire natural theology project as historically understood.

How should one characterize this post-Humean natural theology project? The distinction between natural theology and revealed religion has been significantly blurred. One can understand this as an argument against Hume, as a capitulation to Hume, or as the grateful refinement of the natural theology project in light of Hume's forceful and telling criticisms of earlier, inadequate employments of natural theology. While this volume does not give a clear answer to this question, the work done within its pages aids greatly one's attempts to grasp the place of natural theology in the broader religious context. In that regard, this volume is a valuable addition to contemporary Christian scholarship.

*Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, by Denys Turner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. xix + 271. \$70.00 (cloth), \$29.99 (paper).

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Denys Turner is a theologian and the author of *The Darkness of God* (1995), a well-received study of mystical theology. In the Preface to the present volume he remarks that his earlier book led some to object that he had taken apophaticism "to the point of apparently denying that we can say anything true of God," as was not his intent (p. xiii). His goal in *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* is to redress that imbalance through a careful exploration of what reason can and cannot accomplish in relation to God. Specifically, Turner (a Roman Catholic) defends the position of the First Vatican Council that it is an article of *faith* that the existence of God can be known by natural reason. This might seem to place him at odds with the apophatic approach that he earlier defended. Turner, however, believes that natural theology and apophaticism are natural allies, for natural theology properly pursued places reason "at the end of its tether," asking "the sorts of questions the answers to which . . . are beyond the power of reason to comprehend" (p. xv). If there are rationally compelling proofs of the existence of God, as he believes there must be, "what the 'proofs' prove is at one and the same time the existence of God and that, as said of God, we have finally lost our hold on the meaning of 'exists'" (p. 87).

It will be noticed that I say *if* there are such proofs. Although Turner is confident that such proofs must be available, he does not himself offer one, nor does he say where in the tradition they are to be found. He holds up Aquinas's Five Ways as a model of *how* such proofs ought to be done, but he makes no attempt to rebut the standard objections to the Five Ways or to update Aquinas in contemporary terms. Surprisingly, near the end of the book it emerges that Turner's preferred argument strategy would begin with the question, "why is there something rather than nothing?" This is of course the question famously posed by Leibniz. Turner seems to think that it would be preferable to develop the argument in a Thomistic rather than Leibnizian fashion, but he does not elaborate in any detail. His

effort is limited to arguing, against Kantian or Russellian objections, that the question itself is a legitimate one.

Turner is aware that his failure to provide an actual argument for the existence of God may seem odd. As a theologian, however, he sees his own role as that of explicating the content of faith. Certainly the task of arguing that it is an article of *faith* that God can be proven to exist is significant in its own right. Turner sees the major resistance to this view as coming from the fear that to prove God's existence is necessarily to diminish the mystery of God by placing God within a network of causal explanatory relationships. This suspicion, in turn, he traces back to the Scotistic rejection of analogy. If, as Scotus believed, any argument for the existence of God must use terms univocally in the premises (said of creatures) and the conclusion (said of God), then such an argument will indeed make God describable in the same way as creatures. That would be incompatible, not only with traditional apophatic theology, but with any proper regard for the divine mystery.

Turner's reply to Scotus is a simple one. Although it is true that in a valid argument a term occurring more than once in the premises must bear the same sense (barring some explicit disambiguation) *in those occurrences*, there is no requirement that it do so in the conclusion as well. He illustrates the point with the terms 'cause' and 'mutable thing': each has a univocal meaning within the empirical domain, but when they are combined into the phrase "cause of every mutable thing," the term 'cause' takes on a different meaning which can be understood only by extrapolation (p. 212). As Turner recognizes, this point was made years ago by Peter Geach in his "Causality and Creation" (reprinted in *God and the Soul*). It is surely correct as far as it goes. However, to go on to claim that in such an extrapolation we "lose our hold" on the meaning of the terms involved, and indeed that "we could not know the meaning of what we are justified in attributing" to God (p. 206), is quite unwarranted. Geach's point is precisely that we *do* retain some sense of the meaning of the terms involved; otherwise there would be no purpose to doing the extrapolation. In the case of 'cause,' for example, we retain the basic understanding that if it were not for the action of God, creatures would not exist. That may not be all that is involved in our ordinary understanding of cause, but it is certainly more than nothing.

Turner's exaggeration at this point is symptomatic of a larger misunderstanding. He seems to think of apophaticism primarily in terms of what we do or do not understand, so that a view of God is properly apophatic only if it leaves us with no clear understanding of what we mean in speaking of God. But traditionally apophatic theologians made at least one clear and definitive statement about God: *God is not an intelligible object*. By this they meant not exactly that He cannot be understood by us, but that He is not an object of *noēsis*, "intellection." *Noēsis* is the kind of thinking that "divides reality at the joints" (to use Plato's metaphor) by becoming isomorphic to the actual character of the object thought. It figures centrally in Aristotle's theory of the Prime Mover and Plotinus' theory of Intellect, both of which (the Prime Mover and Intellect) are the single, fully actual act of *noēsis* which embraces all possible intelligible content. To say that God is not an intelligible object (*noēton*) means

that He is not the sort of being that can be embraced in the act of *noēsis*, for He has no intelligible structure—no form, essence, or definition—of the sort to which our thought can conform. It does *not* mean that we cannot speak meaningfully of Him. The more apophatically inclined among the Church Fathers, such as Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen, state clearly that we can and should form conceptions (*ennoiai*) and mental images (*phantasmata*) of God. What we cannot do is form a *noēma*, the particular kind of concept that “latches on” to the object by mirroring its ontological structure.

It is remarkable that Turner, who surely must know the classical sources, says nothing about these matters. I suspect the reason is that he is determined to present Aquinas as an apophatic theologian. Although this is currently a fashionable view, it cannot be sustained without considerable distortion of either Aquinas or apophaticism. Far from holding that God is not an intelligible object, Aquinas, like Augustine before him, holds that God is the *supreme* intelligible object, the one whom all rational beings achieve their *telos* in apprehending. All that Aquinas says about the unknowability of God pertains solely to this life, when our thinking is constrained to operate with mental images derived through the senses. (See, for example, the passage quoted by Turner on p. 43.) In the afterlife the blessed, like the angels, will enjoy a direct vision of the divine essence. There could scarcely be a sharper contrast on this point between Aquinas and the Greek Fathers, who consistently teach that the divine essence remains unknown even to the angels and the blessed.

Apophaticism thus understood might appear to be a rather stark and minimalist view. However, although the Greek Fathers deny the possibility of a conceptual knowledge of God, they do hold that there can be a direct *experience* of God, not only in the afterlife but in the present life as well. By contrast, Aquinas (as Turner rightly notes) holds that “there is no experience of God of any kind in this life” (p. 120). Given the Thomistic view, it is no doubt correct that if natural reason is to know with certainty the existence of God, it must do so via rational demonstration. That is presumably why Turner leaps immediately from the proposition that God can be known to exist through the evidence of creation to the claim that this knowledge “could, at least theoretically, be expanded out into a formal proof” (p. 13)—a claim, incidentally, not made by Vatican I. He seems to overlook that there are many things one can know that one cannot prove, such as the immediate deliverances of perception and memory. This leap makes sense only on the assumption that natural reason is limited in its means of knowing God to rational demonstration.

For an alternative view, one has only to consider the biblical passages that have traditionally been cited on behalf of the possibility of natural theology. St. Paul says that “that which may be known of God is manifest in them [the unrighteous]; for God hath *shewed* it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world *are clearly seen*, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead” (Rom. 1:19–20, my italics). There is no reference here to a rational demonstration; Paul simply assumes that nature can be seen to be God’s handiwork. The same is true in the other passages traditionally cited in this vein, such as Acts 14:17, Wisdom of Solomon 13:1–5, and Psalms 19 and 104.

One reason Turner is eager to insist on the possibility of rational demonstration is that he wants the debate between theists and atheists to be “capable of being conducted on shared rational grounds” (p. xii). But to hold that God can be seen in nature, if one is in the proper moral and spiritual condition, is not at all to deny a role for rational argument. Just as one often has to argue with a friend in order to get him to see something that really ought to be obvious, rational argument may be of great help in achieving the right state of perceptive awareness regarding nature. (See on this point Del Ratzsch, “Perceiving Design” in *God and Design*, ed. Neil Manson [Routledge, 2003], pp. 124–44.) The church fathers certainly were not shy in using argument to refute materialist or polytheistic understandings of nature. However, they typically understood their own argument, not as a demonstration that God exists, but as a way of explicating nature so as to make apparent to our sinful and fallen eyes something that in its own nature is perfectly evident. Thus St. Athanasius remarks: “as they tell of Phidias the sculptor that his works of art by their symmetry and by the proportion of their parts betray Phidias to those who see them although he is not there, so by the order of the universe one ought to perceive God its maker and artificer, even though He be not seen with the bodily eyes” (*Contra Gentes*, chap. 35). *One ought to perceive*. Certainly there is an important role for rational argument here, but it is ultimately no more than that of opening the eyes to something that is plainly there.

In sum, it seems to me that Turner’s devotion to Aquinas leads him to misconstrue both the nature of apophaticism and the proper goals and character of natural theology. Nonetheless, the book offers a useful critique of Scotistic univocity and of many pernicious and irrationalist trends in contemporary theology. Anyone who seeks to achieve an authentically Christian approach to philosophy will find in it much food for thought.

*The Most Real Being: A Biblical and Philosophical Defense of Divine Determinism*, by J. A. Crabtree. Eugene, Oregon: Gutenberg College Press, 2004. Pp xvii & 384. \$33.00.

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This book is a defense of divine determinism: the doctrine that God causes every event to transpire exactly as it does. Chapters one through four are intended to introduce and motivate the book’s topics to a non-philosophical audience. Chapter five is an argument for divine determinism from scripture. The philosophically interesting material starts with chapter six. In chapters six and seven, Crabtree argues that divine determinism is implied by creation *ex nihilo* and that it is implied by divine foreknowledge. In chapter eight, he gives a separate philosophical argument for divine determinism. In chapters nine, ten and eleven, he defends divine determinism against the charge that it is inconsistent with human free will, that it is inconsistent with divine goodness given the existence and extent of evil, and that it undercuts our motivation to be good.