Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 21 | Issue 4

Article 5

10-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Padgett, Alan G. (2004) "Theologia Naturalis: Philosophy of Religion or Doctrine of Creation," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil200421437

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol21/iss4/5>

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THEOLOGIA NATURALIS: PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION OR DOCTRINE OF CREATION?

Alan G. Padgett

This essay seeks to define and defend *theologia naturalis* as a legitimate part of both Christian philosophy and Christian doctrine, by distinguishing two senses of the term: natural theology (in philosophy) or a theology of nature (in doctrinal theology). By paying attention to the differing senses of these terms, and the differences between theology and philosophy, we may overcome the objections to natural theology put forth by Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga, and demonstrate the on-going role of *theologia naturalis* for Christian scholarship.

Among Christian theologians today, natural theology has fallen on hard times. We are told that natural theology is bad for us: it leads to atheism, to a reduction or rejection of the Christian God, or to an abandonment of the Christian gospel.¹ The purpose of this essay is to define and defend *theologia naturalis* as a legitimate part of both Christian philosophy and Christian doctrine, in part by distinguishing two senses of the term. To overcome the objections to natural theology put forth by Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga, it is necessary to distinguish the academic disciplines of Christian doctrine and philosophy, and to interpret *theologia naturalis* as natural theology (for philosophy) and a theology of nature (for Christian doctrine). By paying attention to the different senses of these terms, and the different methodologies of philosophy and Christian doctrine, we can avoid the criticisms of natural theology made by Christian scholars in recent years, and demonstrate the on-going role of *theologia naturalis* for Christian scholarship.

Perhaps I should begin by stating what I understand Christian doctrine and Christian philosophy to be. I use the terms "Christian doctrine" to refer to an academic discipline often called dogmatic or doctrinal theology, which includes both systematic and moral theology (or Christian dogmatics and Christian ethics). One aspect of Christian doctrine as an intellectual discipline is its reliance upon faith and divine revelation. This reliance upon faith does not undermine the rationality of theology, as Karl Barth and T. F. Torrance among many theologians have rightly insisted.² Rather, it points us toward an understanding of God that is rooted and grounded in God's own self-revelation, that is, in the Word of God.

While there is no generally accepted definition of philosophy, by Christian philosophy I mean nothing less than the very best academic philosophy (however one may understand that); pursued according to the

most rigorous standards of reason and logic, but placed within a larger perspective, viz. a Christian worldview. In this way, Christian philosophy is no different in its formal role and contribution than a Christian approach to and interpretation of the natural sciences, the human sciences, or the arts. All of them are important partners in developing a Christian worldview. In other words, Christian philosophy takes its place alongside the other academic disciplines with a Christian approach to learning, or Christian scholarship.³ This is one prominent way that members of the Society of Christian Philosophers have understood this concept, and it is one I am happy to embrace. With these disciplines in mind, we can now turn to an understanding of *theologia naturalis*.

Rightly Dividing Philosophy from Theology

The term “natural theology” (*theologia naturalis*) is highly ambiguous, especially in the hands of its critics. Even a proponent of natural theology, such as James Barr, can use the term in so many ways that it becomes difficult to follow his argument.⁴ Two senses of the term are particularly important, which I shall call “natural theology” and a “theology of nature.”⁵ Distinguishing between these two is important for a clear understanding of the current debate surrounding natural theology. One simple sense of natural theology is that of philosophical arguments concerning the existence and nature of a god. These appeal, like all philosophy, to general characteristics of our world (‘nature’) and are based upon human reason. I leave the word ‘god’ in a lower case, because it is not necessarily the Western God that is in view. The character of this god is also open to philosophical reflection and critique. So Alvin Plantinga, for example, is overly narrow in defining natural theology as “the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God.”⁶ For philosophy of religion is rightly concerned not only with the existence of god, but also with the nature of this god, as known through philosophical inquiry. Here Stephen Davis and Richard Swinburne are on firmer ground; both of these natural theologians provide philosophical arguments about the nature *and* existence of god.⁷ Natural theology, thus understood, is a part of philosophy. It appeals to a knowledge of god derived from reason and nature, and makes no central appeal to special revelation. For the purposes of clarity in discussing the nature and province of natural theology, let us use the terms “natural theology” in this strict sense to denote an aspect of the philosophy of religion. So when William Alston defines natural theology as “the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs,” we need to understand that his definition of natural theology places it with the discipline of philosophy: natural theology thus understood is a *philosophical* enterprise.⁸

By the terms “a theology of nature,” on the other hand, I mean to designate an essential aspect of Christian doctrine. The task of Christian doctrine is to know God, based upon God’s own revelation, and so come to see all things (including ourselves) in relationship to God. Since this God is creator of all, including the natural world, Christian doctrine will necessarily develop a specifically Christian doctrine of creation, including a

"theology of nature." George Hendry places this question at the heart of such a theology of nature: "What is the place, meaning, and purpose of the world of nature in the overall plan of God in creation and redemption?" "*Theologia naturalis* understood as a theology of nature is part of a Christian doctrine of creation, grounded in the revelation of God in Scripture and supremely in Jesus Christ. Because the doctrine of creation is an essential part of the task of Christian doctrine, so also a theology of nature is essential to Christian doctrine rightly understood. Even Karl Barth, for example, (no friend of natural theology!) developed a doctrine of creation at great length in his *Church Dogmatics*.¹⁰

It is important to distinguish these two senses of *theologia naturalis* (viz. natural theology or a theology of nature) in order to appreciate the debates surrounding natural theology today. For example, when James Barr states (in criticism of Karl Barth) that "the natural theology of the Bible is built into the revelational and salvific material [in Scripture]," we can only accept this conclusion when we realize that Barr means a theology of nature, and not natural theology in the strict sense.¹¹ Barr is noting that the Bible's theology of nature is built into the biblical witness concerning human salvation and divine revelation. Another example of this tendency to confuse natural theology and a theology of nature comes from the recent work of Alister McGrath. In defending "The Purpose and Place of Natural Theology" for Christian doctrine today, McGrath claims that "it is perfectly possible to frame a natural theology in such a manner that it does not involve such an intention to prove God's existence."¹² When McGrath goes on to describe such a natural theology, it becomes clear he is describing a theology of nature, not natural theology in the strict sense.

These different senses of *theologia naturalis* arise from their placement in different disciplines. While it is impossible to give a generally accepted definition of either philosophy or Christian doctrine, we can insist that they are not the same academic discipline without having a universally accepted or necessary definition of either. As I have argued elsewhere, all the disciplines of academia (including philosophy and theology) are best understood in the light of Christ as distinct but interconnected and equally important colleagues, whose task is the development of a Christian worldview for the Church today.¹³ Each discipline can, under certain circumstances, rationally influence the other: but each remains distinct with respect to its main goals and methods of inquiry. However we understand philosophy, as an academic discipline it does not argue on the basis of Biblical exegesis or creedal witness. It may investigate philosophical issues in these areas, as in many other areas: but that is another matter entirely. Philosophy itself as an academic discipline does not use the Bible as philosophical evidence. Philosophy as a general discipline, practiced by Christians and non-Christians, does not begin with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, Christian doctrine does begin, go along with, and end with exactly this special revelation. Like any good Christian scholar, the Christian philosopher will approach her academic specialty from within the larger framework of a Christian worldview. This is the basis of all Christian learning or Christian scholarship, including a Christian approach to philosophy. But this fact, which I fully embrace,

does not turn philosophy, biology, or history into Christian doctrine, nor does it turn Christian doctrine into physics, English literature, or philosophy. Thus, equally important to understanding the character and nature of *theologia naturalis* is its placement in the distinct academic disciplines of philosophy and Christian doctrine.

Objections to Natural Theology: Plantinga and Barth

Christian philosophy has an important role to play in the development of a Christian worldview for our times. Most Christian intellectuals are rightly interested in the rational assessment of religious claims, the relationship between faith and reason, and the extent to which reasons can be given for our Christian faith. All of these questions are investigated by philosophers of religion, and natural theology (as part of a philosophy of religion) would seem to be essential to these investigations. Yet even when we pay attention to the different senses of *theologia naturalis* as natural theology (in philosophy) and a theology of nature (in Christian doctrine), there are still scholars who will object to the aims and methods of natural theology in philosophy of religion. While we cannot here examine all such criticisms, two Reformed thinkers are particularly prominent: Plantinga and Barth. We will focus upon their objections.

Plantinga's objections to natural theology are well known, and spelled out in several essays. In his central essay, "Reason and Belief in God," his major objection to natural theology is that it is a form of evidentialism and rationalism, or in other words, classical foundationalism. The natural theologian appears to hold that belief in God is not epistemically adequate without evidence and argument. In "rejecting natural theology," Plantinga asserts that "the propriety or rightness of belief in God in no way depends upon the success or availability of the sort of theistic arguments that form the natural theologian's stock in trade."¹⁴ In other words, Plantinga's main objection to natural theology is the apparent assumption that faith needs evidence and argument in order to be rationally acceptable or philosophically legitimate.

At this point I wish to simply agree with Plantinga. Belief in God can be and often is perfectly legitimate and proper without any philosophical arguments. In other words, Christian faith does not depend upon the practice of philosophy (specifically natural theology), but rather upon more direct, immediate and spiritual sources of the knowledge of God. Nevertheless, as a specialty within philosophy of religion, *natural theology* will indeed be based upon reason, nature, evidence and argument. This is because natural theology is a philosophical enterprise, and will use the standard methods of philosophy to achieve its aims. In his essay, Plantinga allows for this possibility, stating that "the natural theologian" may become involved in philosophical debate with unbelievers, but at the same time point out that "her belief in God is not based upon its relation to the deliverances of reason."¹⁵ In his more recent Gifford lectures, Plantinga goes so far as to admit that "Of course it doesn't follow [from his position] that theistic belief can't get warrant by way of argument from other beliefs; nor does it follow that natural theology and more informal theistic argu-

ment is of no worth in the believer's intellectual and spiritual life."¹⁶ We can see from these comments that Plantinga allows for a natural theology which is a part of philosophy, but in no way provides a philosophical foundation for Christian faith, or the necessary epistemic warrant for Christian belief understood in general terms.

Plantinga's objections to natural theology are not decisive. On the contrary, they help us to see that natural theology is best understood as a part of the philosophy of religion. Natural theology should not be confused with religion itself, nor with a doctrinal theology which is based upon religious faith and practice. Yet as Christian scholars interested in the development of a Christian worldview, we will want this intellectual activity (natural theology) to be grounded in Christian learning, just as we would any intellectual discipline. A Christian philosopher may well be very interested in natural theology, but should not suppose that the viability and epistemic justification of Christian faith is dependent upon natural theology. On the other hand, as a philosopher, a Christian natural theologian will need to give some reason and evidence for her beliefs and conclusions. Here I believe Richard Swinburne, perhaps the world's leading natural theologian, has a point. Rational belief *within the discipline of philosophy* (including rational religious belief) requires rational explication and explanation, including some evidence and argument, even if those beliefs are not *based upon* evidence and argument.¹⁷ Plantinga, after all, does give lots of *arguments* for the beliefs he accepts in philosophy of religion. He provides logical explication and explanation of them as well. I am not here talking about a return to classical foundationalism, but about the kind of things philosophers do in the normal practice within their discipline.

Objections of a different type to natural theology come from the work of Karl Barth. First we need to understand Barth's definition of *theologia naturalis*, and then we can begin to grasp the heart of his objection. In his famous debate with Brunner, Barth defined natural theology as:

every (positive or negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, i.e., to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ, and whose method therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture.¹⁸

Here Barth's notion of *theologia naturalis* is quite different from either of the senses I have been developing in this essay. Natural theology as he uses the term is first of all a kind of theology, that is, a type of Christian doctrine which seeks "to interpret divine revelation." Secondly, it is not so much an argument or philosophical inquiry as the "formulation of a system," that is, a systematic theology. Barth's objection to natural theology, then, is his objection to any so-called Christian theology or dogmatics which is done independent of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, made known in the witness of the Old and New Testaments, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the witness of the Church. Again, in his *Göttingen Dogmatics*, Barth argues that "if God does not speak, then it is not God that we hear in those supposed voices of God but a voice from this world, from this unredeemed

world, from the contradiction of our existence." For this reason he seeks to "take the one part of the material world that has been mentioned by what is called natural theology and include it at once in the true Christian theology that is called supernatural, that is, in revelation."¹⁹

Barth's objection to natural theology, then, is to any Christian doctrine (systematic theology) that is not based primarily and essentially on special, supernatural revelation, that is to say, on the Word of God. "Natural theology" denotes, for him, "a theology which makes a great show of guaranteeing the knowability of God apart from grace and therefore from faith."²⁰ For Barth, the words "natural theology" point to the attempt of sinful, disobedient, and arrogant "natural man" to control god, to put the knowledge of god at our own disposal, and therefore to "know" a false god.²¹ For this reason, Barth objects to any natural theology which pretends to be a philosophical foundation for faith in the Christian God, "so that the establishing of his knowability in the natural sphere, in the sphere of the human life-endavour, will in fact mean a preparation for the establishing of His knowability in His revelation."²² Barth objects to any theology which seeks to control, found, or guarantee the Word of God.

I believe that Barth, and Luther before him, have powerful truths to declare about the pretensions of human reason, and the ability of sin to turn even our best and highest cultural expressions into evil, idolatry, and death. But even so, does this mean that any and all types of *theologia naturalis* are minions of Satan? There is plenty of room in Barth's theological method for a theology of nature, as he himself develops later in the *Church Dogmatics*. It is just that by the term "natural theology" Barth always means something in opposition to the knowledge of God found in God's own revelation in Jesus Christ. In other words, for Barth natural theology is modernist or rationalist theology, perhaps best exemplified by the theology of the Liberal Protestant tradition.

Barth did not object to a theology of nature, grounded in the Word of God, which he developed in his doctrine of creation. But what about the philosophical attempt to know God, that is, what about natural theology in our strict sense, as a discipline of philosophy of religion? Here Barth would seem to shout once again, *Nein!*²³ What Barth fails to consider seriously is the idea that there might well be a *Christian philosophy* which does not confuse the God of Abraham and Sarah with the god of the philosophers.²⁴ Indeed, Søren Kierkegaard (whom Barth often quotes and/or borrows from) should be understood exactly as such a Christian philosopher.

While rejecting the idea of a Christian philosophy in explicit terms, in his important essay, "The First Commandment as an Axiom for Theology," Barth comes close to considering such a possibility. In this essay he considers what it would mean to add the little word "and" to revelation so as to include other sources of truth in theology, e.g., revelation *and* reason.²⁵ In this essay dedicated to avoiding idolatry in Christian theology, Barth gives three cautions to those who would add the little word "and" to revelation, as a basis for the knowledge of God. First, we must speak of revelation "with a notably heightened seriousness and interest, and by speaking of that other criterion only secondarily and for the sake of revelation" (p. 73). Second (and this sounds very much like what I am calling Christian schol-

arship) theology expresses its commitment to the first commandment by "interpreting those other things according to revelation and not the other way around" (p. 74). Third, theology must permit "no possibility . . . of intermixing, exchanging, or identifying the two concepts in this relation" (p. 75). I believe all these cautions are well taken. Yet *pace* Barth there is plenty of room here for a Christian philosophy, which takes Christian faith and revelation seriously, but nevertheless engages in philosophy as philosophy (not exchanging one for the other, nor mixing them up). Indeed, it is only by not mixing up the disciplines of philosophy and theology that we can avoid the objections of both Barth and Plantinga to *theologia naturalis*.

To avoid the Barthian objection, natural theology must keep its place within a strictly philosophical domain. It cannot and should not become a kind of substitute for revelation: a more acceptable means (to the arrogance of Enlightenment rationalism) of the knowledge of God, a means independent of and laying the foundations for the Word of God. That humans can know God through nature, reason, and philosophy is not in question. Whether such a god is Yahweh or Baal is the real theological point of Barth's objection. By rejecting the Enlightenment call to provide a sure, rational foundation for faith, natural theology can avoid this objection.

Secondly, while also being a part of Christian scholarship, and therefore willing to own its Christian presuppositions without apology, a Christian natural theology should do its work according to the highest and most rigorous philosophical standards, in dialogue and debate with other philosophers in a pluralistic academy. That is, natural theology should maintain itself as good philosophy, and not short-circuit philosophical debate by appeals to special revelation, religious faith, or other particularities of the Christian religion *as a means of settling arguments*. The best natural theologians already practice their art in just this manner.

In this essay I have proposed that we accept two distinct senses of *theologia naturalis*: natural theology (in philosophy) and a theology of nature (in Christian doctrine). By paying attention to these differences, we can overcome the objections to natural theology brought by Plantinga and Barth. I have argued that, thus understood, natural theology continues to have an essential role to play in both Christian philosophy and Christian doctrine. I will close this brief and suggestive essay by considering some objections to my proposal.

Some Objections Considered

Several proponents of natural theology have argued that Christian doctrine itself should include natural theology.²⁶ I have argued that natural theology should keep its place in philosophy instead. Does this mean philosophy has no place in theology? By no means! Christian doctrine uses the methods of many other disciplines, including rhetoric, literature, history, philology, as well as philosophy. But since natural theology eschews any basis in special revelation, and depends upon broadly philosophical bases for its arguments, its disciplinary home is philosophy and not doctrinal theology. Of course Christian doctrine should listen to and engage natural theology, but the conclusions of natural theology must be tested by doctri-

nal standards of truth and reason before they can be admitted into Christian doctrine.

Another objection might be that I am treating theology and philosophy as if their aims, boundaries and methods are fixed for all time. Such is not the case. Some attention to real differences that exist amongst the current mix of disciplines within the flux of academia is also important. Take politics as an analogy. After all, the differences between political entities like nations, states, counties and cities is equally open to revision, historical change, and social construction. But knowing the difference between the USA and Canada, or Delhi and Delphi, is still important. The fact that things are in flux does not imply that all differences and distinctions are irrelevant. For the purposes of this paper, it is best that the distinction between philosophy and doctrinal theology be clarified. Another essay could develop similarities and fruitful topics for interdisciplinary dialogue.

My position would suggest that such interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophy and doctrinal theology ought to be quite fruitful. Three areas come to mind immediately for such interdisciplinary work: philosophical theology, apologetics, and science-and-religion. Philosophical theology of necessity draws upon both philosophy and theology. The task of philosophical theology is exactly to bring into critical conversation what we have learned about God from both Christian philosophy and Christian doctrine. It is therefore automatically an interdisciplinary enterprise: it draws from both philosophy and Christian theology, looking at places of intersection, conflict, and consonance. As T. V. Morris puts this point in his helpful introduction to philosophical theology, "Our main area of inquiry in this book is in many ways appropriately thought of as another specialized branch of theology, although, given its approach, it is just as truly a part of philosophy."²⁷

Other fields also provide grounds for the interdisciplinary conversation between philosophy and theology. Apologetics would be an obvious one. In its rational response to contemporary critics of religion, Christian apologetics will draw upon the best Christian theology and philosophy. The recent upsurge of dialogue between theology and science is another important interdisciplinary area where the voice of philosophy must not be silenced. In science-and-religion debates, both theology and philosophy are important dialogue partners with the sciences. So there are in fact many areas where theology and philosophy work together, without becoming identical.

One final objection: it might seem that I am seeking to seal-off Christian doctrine from intellectual attack, or at least from the rigor of philosophical argument and public debate. Such is not the case. Christian doctrine does its work in public, and is open to public scrutiny. Its arguments, evidence and rationality are open for all to examine. This does not imply that we must give up our belief in special revelation as the heart and soul of Christian doctrine. For the aim of Christian doctrine is to know and love God — not just any god but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ — and to know other things in relation to the Blessed Trinity. To say that Christian doctrine is rational and public does not imply that Christian doctrine should be done as if the Father has not spoken in his Word, as if Jesus

Christ were not the incarnation of the living Logos, and as if the Spirit had not inspired the prophets and apostles.

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NOTES

1. See, e.g., Karl Barth, *No!*, in E. Brunner and K. Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (1946; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002); Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 1987).

2. See Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); and T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1969).

3. On the notion of a Christian scholarship, see i.a. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), idem, *Educating for Shalom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) and George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1997).

4. James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Pr., 1993), 1-7.

5. For a different taxonomy, see George L. Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Trinity Pr. Intern., 2003), 8-25. Murphy puts together into one category, "dependent natural theology," what I wish to distinguish as natural theology vs. a theology of nature.

6. See his "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Pr., 1982), 63. See more recently, Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2000), 171n, 179n.

7. See Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1977), idem., *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1994), idem., *The Existence of God*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1991); and Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); idem., *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

8. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Pr.,), 289.

9. G. S. Hendry, *Theology of Nature* (Philadelphia: Westminster Pr., 1980), 11.

10. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 4 vols. in 13 parts (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-1975); cited hereafter as CD. Volume III is *The Doctrine of Creation*.

11. Barr, 190n, his emphasis.

12. Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, vol. 1: *Nature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 266.

13. A. G. Padgett, *Science and the Study of God: A Mutuality Model for Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

14. Plantinga, "Reason," 72.

15. Plantinga, "Reason," 71.

16. Plantinga, *Warranted*, 179n.

17. See Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1981). What Swinburne calls "belief" in this book I interpret as *rational* belief.

18. E. Brunner and K. Barth, *Natural Theology*, 74.

19. K. Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 92.

20. CD, II/1, 85.
21. See CD II/1, 86-87.
22. CD II/1, 89.
23. *Nein!* is the German title for the booklet Karl Barth wrote against Brunner, which is translated into English in Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*.
24. See, e.g., Barth's rejection of a Christian worldview, based upon his fallacious equation of Christian learning with the triumph of Christendom: *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 37-38.
25. English translation in H. M. Rumscheidt, ed., *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Pub., 1986). Page numbers in the text are to the Rumscheidt translation.
26. One example would be the somewhat neglected work of Richard Rice, *Reason and the Contours of Faith* (Riverside, CA: La Sierra Univ. Pr., 1991), especially the two chapters on natural theology.
27. Thomas V. Morris, *Our Concept of God*.