

The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology

Michael Sudduth



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THE REFORMED OBJECTION TO NATURAL THEOLOGY

Michael Sudduth examines three prominent objections to natural theology that have emerged in the Reformed streams of the Protestant theological tradition: objections from the immediacy of our knowledge of God, the noetic effects of sin, and the logic of theistic arguments. Distinguishing between the project of natural theology and particular models of natural theology, Sudduth argues that none of the main Reformed objections is successful as an objection to the project of natural theology itself. One particular model of natural theology – the dogmatic model – is best suited to handle Reformed concerns over natural theology. According to this model, rational theistic arguments represent the reflective reconstruction of the natural knowledge of God by the Christian in the context of dogmatic theology.

Informed by both contemporary religious epistemology and the history of Protestant philosophical theology, Sudduth's examination illuminates the complex nature of the project of natural theology and its place in the Reformed tradition.

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The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology

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For Richard Swinburne

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Preface

The foundations of the present book were laid in my 1996 D.Phil. dissertation at the University of Oxford in which I explored the prospects for the compatibility of two very different approaches to the knowledge of God, one that regards the knowledge of God as immediate or intuitive and a contrasting viewpoint that sees the knowledge of God as a matter of logical inference or argument. Although both viewpoints have an old and interesting pedigree, in contemporary philosophy of religion they have crystallized into the dichotomy between ‘Reformed epistemology,’ represented by thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Alston, and ‘evidentialism,’ represented by thinkers such as Richard Swinburne, Anthony Kenny, Stewart Goetz and Stephen Wykstra. My doctoral thesis attempted to synthesize the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga and features of the evidentialist tradition with its emphasis on natural theology—rational arguments for the existence and nature of God.

It was only natural that this early project in the epistemology of religious belief should evolve into an examination of the place of natural theology in the Reformed stream of the Protestant theological tradition—the focus of the present book. First, Plantinga and Wolterstorff have each contended that the central insights of ‘Reformed epistemology’ may be found in the writings of prominent Reformed theologians such as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and John Calvin, a connection that is responsible for the arguably infelicitous designation ‘Reformed epistemology.’ Secondly, Reformed thinkers have long held that the natural knowledge of God is both innate, the product of a natural mental disposition, and acquired, a matter of inference from the existence, beauty, and order exhibited in the physical world. Historically, the reception of natural theology in the Reformed tradition (an underemphasized theme in the contemporary literature) has been grounded in this duplex conception of the natural knowledge of God. Hence the kind of synthesis I aimed at demonstrating in my dissertation is part of Reformed philosophical theology itself.

However, there is also in the Reformed tradition an interesting confluence of theological and philosophical objections to natural theology that renders this synthesis and the corresponding stance on natural theology problematic. An examination of these objections provides a context in which we can carefully evaluate the relationship between natural theology and the internal logic of Reformed thought. In addition to clarifying the place of natural theology in Reformed theology, such an examination will provide a range of conceptual distinctions concerning natural theology that will be of broader interest to the philosophy of religion. Theological objections to natural theology, for example, have not received nearly as much treatment in the literature as purely philosophical

objections. While there has been a vast amount of literature analyzing the cogency of various theistic arguments, there have been relatively fewer contributions to meta-level issues such as the function of such arguments. Theological objections to natural theology and the function of theistic arguments are both prominent themes in the present work.

The arguments developed in the course of the work owe much to important predecessors. Richard Swinburne's work in the area of natural theology and Alvin Plantinga's work in religious epistemology are perhaps the two most important intellectual influences that have inspired and shaped this work. (I have of course borrowed the title of the book from Plantinga's well-known 1980 paper by the same title.) Of considerable importance to the epistemological tier of the book is my appeal to 'multiple grounds' for theistic belief, a maneuver that allows natural theology to positively interface with immediate grounds for belief in God. This represents a development of insights articulated by William Alston in his 1991 book *Perceiving God*. In addition to Swinburne, my positive treatment of natural theology draws heavily on nineteenth-century Calvinists such as James Henry Thornwell, Charles Hodge, William Shedd, and Augustus Strong. My emphasis on the 'dogmatic' conception of natural theology owes much to early Protestant scholastic theologians, as well as Dutch neo-Calvinists such as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. In this context it would be important to mention Richard Muller's multi-volume *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* and Rev. John Platt's *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650*. Both works paved the way for the historical dimensions to this book, specifically my emphasis on the Reformed endorsement of natural theology.

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Introduction

In the broad sense ‘natural theology’ refers to what can be known or rationally believed about the existence and nature of God on the basis of human reason or our natural cognitive faculties. Natural theology in this sense is a way of designating ‘natural knowledge of God,’ which in the western religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is typically contrasted with the knowledge of God derived from sacred scripture or divine revelation. Some philosophers and theologians have regarded the natural knowledge of God as an innate, intuitive, or experiential knowledge—ways of indicating that the idea of God is natural to the human mind or arises immediately, without any conscious process of reasoning. The more dominant tendency, though, has been to view the natural knowledge of God as something acquired by way of logical inference from other truths naturally knowable by the human mind. For this reason natural theology is more narrowly and perhaps more commonly identified with the project of developing arguments for God’s existence, so-called ‘theistic arguments.’ In this sense natural theology attempts to reason to truths about God solely from what we know by way of sense perception, induction, intuition, and other natural cognitive processes.

There have been two general kinds of criticisms of the project of developing rational arguments for the existence and nature of God. There are distinctly *philosophical* criticisms stemming from fairly general considerations about the nature and limits of human cognition and language, logical constraints on proofs, and the nature of causation.¹ The upshot of such criticisms is that we cannot rationally infer anything about the existence or nature of God as ‘God’ has been defined in the western religious traditions, roughly, as an immaterial, eternal, and omnipresent personal being, infinite in power, goodness, and knowledge, and the creator and sustainer of the universe. There are also *theological* objections to natural theology stemming from the internal logic of religious traditions and their scriptural teachings. In the Christian tradition, for example, theistic arguments have been criticized on various theological grounds: the transcendent nature of God, the debilitating effects of sin on human reason, the experiential nature of

¹ David Hume (1711–1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) both relied on principles that led to skepticism about reaching rationally justified conclusions about things beyond immediate experience. They each held that we are only justified in postulating observable processes or entities as the causal explanation of observable events. Such presuppositions clearly undermine many of the arguments of natural theology, which postulate God—a being who is not observable—as the causal explanation of observable events. Not surprisingly, Hume and Kant are well known for their philosophical opposition to natural theology.

religious faith and devotion, and the disparity between the God of philosophical proofs and the God revealed in Scripture who is the object of religious worship.

Philosophical and theological objections to natural theology have been fairly prominent in Protestant Christianity. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Søren Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth are regularly regarded as exemplars of Protestant anxieties over natural theology.² Some of the more forceful criticisms of natural theology have arisen in the Reformed streams of Protestantism. ‘Reformed’ here designates the tradition of Christian theology and theological reflection originating in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and historically articulated in Calvinistic documents such as the *Belgic Confession* (1561), *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), *Canons of Dort* (1618–1619), and *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646). In addition to Luther and Calvin, representatives of the tradition include Philip Melancthon, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Francis Turretin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Louis Berkhof. Reformed thinkers represent various Protestant denominations, including Lutheran, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, Reformed Episcopal, and Protestant Reformed, as well as Congregationalists, Methodists, and Baptists who adhere to the Reformation or Calvinistic view of human nature and salvation.³

As a first approximation, the present book is about criticisms of natural theology that have emerged in the Reformed theological tradition. Since the resurrection of philosophy of religion in Anglo-American philosophy during the last fifty years, there has been a plethora of literature on natural theology. Most of this literature has concentrated on the philosophical axis of the dialogue concerning natural theology, largely ignoring religious objections to natural theology and their interface with more philosophically oriented objections.⁴ The present book aims

² Religious opposition to theistic arguments has not been restricted to the Protestant tradition, nor is it unique to modernity. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) addressed religious objections to natural theology in his *Summa theologiae* (Ia.2.1–2) and *Summa contra gentiles* (I.10–12). For a discussion on modern opposition to natural theology in the Catholic tradition, see R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature* (2 vols, London: B. Herder, 1949), vol. 1, chapter 1.

³ The present work will include thinkers representative of historic Reformed orthodoxy (as defined by the tradition’s important confessional statements through the seventeenth century), as well as thinkers who deviate in various ways from historic Reformed orthodoxy but remain in dialogue with the tradition. On the difficulties involved in defining the Reformed tradition and setting its doctrinal parameters, see *Reformed Theology in America*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1997), pp. 1–11.

⁴ Some notable exceptions include John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), chapter 7; C. Stephen Evans, “Apologetics in a New Key: Relieving Protestant Anxieties over Natural Theology” in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays*, ed. Mark McLeod and William Lane Craig (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1990), pp. 65–75; Stephen Cahn, “The Irrelevance to Religion of Philosophical Proofs for the Existence of God,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6:2 (1969): 170–2; John Baillie, “The Irrelevance of Proofs from the Biblical Point of View” in

to fill an important lacuna in the current literature. There is within the Reformed streams of Protestantism an interesting, and I think important, confluence of philosophical and theological objections to natural theology. Engaging these objections will bring greater clarity to both the nature of the project of natural theology itself and its proper place within Reformed theology.

Characterizing the Reformed Objection to Natural Theology

In the twentieth century the idea of Reformed opposition to natural theology has been characterized in two different ways. On the one hand, several prominent contemporary philosophers of religion have maintained that the dominant attitude of theologians within the Reformed tradition, stretching back to the Reformation, has been a negative one with respect to natural theology. On this view, most Reformed thinkers have allegedly either rejected natural theology altogether or at least not embraced it with much enthusiasm due to their suspicions about its propriety or usefulness.⁵ On the other hand, some Protestant historians and theologians have argued that the endorsement of natural theology in the Reformed tradition represents a departure from Reformation theology. This view typically concedes the widespread acceptance of natural theology by thinkers within the tradition but goes on to contend that this acceptance, entering the tradition during the period of Protestant scholasticism, is at odds with the internal logic of Reformation theology.⁶

There is no doubt that quite a few prominent thinkers in the Reformed tradition have been highly critical of natural theology. This is particularly true of representatives of Reformed orthodoxy in the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition originating with Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Herman Bavinck, Herman Dooyeweerd, and G.H. Kersten, for example, provide highly negative evaluations of natural theology. Objections to natural theology among conservative theologians are also present in twentieth-

The Existence of God, ed. John Hick (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 204–10; Douglas Groothuis, “Proofs, Pride, and Incarnation: Is Natural Theology Theologically Taboo?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (1995): 67–77, and “Do Theistic Proofs Prove the Wrong God?” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 29 (1999): 247–60.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980): 49–63, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Reformed Tradition” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 165–70.

⁶ Paul Althaus, *Die Prinzipien, der deutschen reformierten Dogmatik in Zeitalter der aristotelischen Scholastik* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1914), pp. 73–95; Ernst Bizer, *Frühorthodoxie und Rationalismus* (Zurich: EVZ Verlag, 1963), pp. 32–50; Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrell Guder (2 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981–1982); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), vol. II.1, pp. 127–8.

century French and American Calvinism, for example in theologians such as Auguste Lecerf, and Herman Hoeksema, and apologists Cornelius Van Til and Gordon Clark. Opposition to natural theology is even more extreme if we broaden the Reformed tradition to include twentieth-century thinkers like G.C. Berkouwer, John Baillie, and Karl Barth. So there have been criticisms of natural theology *in* the Reformed tradition, and these criticisms have often dominated discussions of natural theology among Reformed thinkers in the twentieth century. It is also fair to say that natural theology in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dogmatic systems marks an important point of discontinuity with the theology of the Reformers. However, while there are elements of truth in both of these accounts of the genesis and character of Reformed objections to natural theology, neither viewpoint is plausible when viewed against the actual historical record. The first two chapters of this book are designed in part to rebut these two representations of Reformed objections to natural theology. In Chapter 1, I outline the emergence and development of the Reformed endorsement of natural theology, from the period of the Protestant Reformation to the end of the nineteenth century. I argue that there is a historically continuous commitment in the Reformed tradition to both the natural knowledge of God and the project of developing theistic arguments. In Chapter 2, I address the shortcomings of the two viewpoints above in the light of the historical outline.

Two important conceptual distinctions emerge from the historical discussion that will be essential to the subsequent analysis of Reformed objections to natural theology.

First, there is a distinction between natural theology as natural *knowledge* of God and natural theology as rational *proofs* or *arguments* for the existence and nature of God. Beginning in Chapter 2, I will designate the former natural theology α and the latter natural theology β . Reformed thinkers have traditionally distinguished between the knowledge of God engendered by philosophical argument and the knowledge of God that arises spontaneously in the human mind with our experience of the world. Although reasoning may be a source of natural knowledge of God, the natural knowledge of God typically does not first arise as the result of any conscious process of reasoning. From this viewpoint, natural theology β involves the conceptual clarification and reflective development of natural theology α , a kind of formalization of an innate or spontaneously acquired knowledge of God. Hence, we can think of natural theology β as grounded in natural theology α . Moreover, to the extent that Scripture itself affirms natural theology α (a traditional interpretation of Romans 1:19–20), we could view natural theology β as a clarification, development, and defense of a datum of Scripture. In this way, the project of natural theology β would have biblical warrant, in much the same way that the systematic development of other biblical doctrines is warranted.

Secondly, while there is consensus in the Reformed tradition on the propriety of the project of developing theistic arguments, there is a diversity of views on the *function* of theistic arguments. Failure to grasp this point has hampered prior

attempts at understanding the nature and ramifications of Reformed criticisms of natural theology β . In Chapter 2, I outline several models of natural theology β contained in the historical account of Chapter 1. By ‘models’ of natural theology β , I primarily mean ways of thinking about the *function* of theistic arguments, what they are supposed to accomplish, how they relate to the larger context of biblical theology, and so forth. The functional diversity of theistic arguments is of considerable importance, especially when assessing Reformed objections to natural theology β . It is also a motif that has been largely ignored by critics of natural theology β in the tradition. While I provide a taxonomy of several models of natural theology β , one of the important distinctions is between models of natural theology β that situate theistic arguments *within* dogmatic theology and those models of natural theology β that see theistic arguments as something external to dogmatic theology, a purely rational prolegomenon to or rational foundation for dogmatic theology. One of the important themes to be developed in this book is natural theology β as an activity carried out by the Christian as part of the discourse of dogmatic theology.

Evaluating Reformed Objections to Natural Theology

While the first two chapters of this book are concerned with clarifying and supporting a historical thesis concerning the *de facto* Reformed endorsement of natural theology α and β , the remaining part of this book is concerned with *defending* the normative status of this Reformed endorsement of natural theology α and β . This book will be largely concerned with evaluating the nature and force of a variety of philosophical and theological objections to natural theology β proposed by Reformed thinkers.

In the course of the work I will examine three kinds of Reformed objections to natural theology β . In Chapters 3 through 5, I consider objections to natural theology β from the alleged innate or immediate character of the natural knowledge of God. These arguments attempt to sever the connection between natural theology α and natural theology β . In Chapters 6 and 7, I examine objections to natural theology β based on Reformed anthropology; specifically, alleged epistemic implications of the Reformed doctrine of the total depravity of human nature. These arguments attempt to undermine natural theology β by denying or significantly restricting natural theology α . As a further response to such arguments, Chapter 8 explores the nature and plausibility of Christian natural theology; roughly, natural theology β as the rational reconstruction by the Christian of what can in principle be known about God from the order of nature. Chapters 9 through 11 evaluate objections to natural theology β from their alleged deficiencies as pieces of logical argumentation, that is, the failure of the arguments to prove, demonstrate, or rationally support their conclusions about the existence and nature of God. While theological considerations play a role in all three objections, they are most conspicuous in the

second objection, depending as it does on the Reformed doctrine of sin. The first and third objections are predominately philosophical in character.

Why these three objections? There are certainly other kinds of Reformed objections to natural theology β , some of which I will note as occasion arises. The above three objections, though, are the more frequently encountered criticisms in the literature, and at least two of the objections are of interest outside the context of Reformed theology. The logic of theistic arguments and the alleged immediacy of the knowledge of God have both been prominent topics in general philosophy of religion since the second half of the twentieth century. This gives the discussion broad appeal. More importantly, as I will argue, other sorts of Reformed objections to natural theology β often depend on at least one of the three above objections, so the latter are really the more fundamental sorts of criticisms. Finally, as I will show in the course of this book, engaging these particular objections illuminates different ways of construing the function of theistic arguments and thereby makes an important contribution to our understanding of the project of natural theology.

The central question of this book is whether any of the three Reformed objections to natural theology β is a *good* objection to natural theology β . However, given the diversity of Reformed models of natural theology β articulated in Chapter 2, it will be important to distinguish between an objection to some particular model(s) of natural theology β and an objection to the project of natural theology β itself. I will refer to the former sort of objection as a *model-specific* objection and the latter as a *project objection*. Reformed theologians are not always clear on this distinction, and this lack of clarity often leads Reformed critics of natural theology β to overstate the force of their criticisms. In asking whether any of the objections to natural theology β to be considered in this book is a good objection to natural theology β , I will be primarily interested in determining whether any of the objections, severally or jointly, constitutes a good project objection to natural theology β .

I will show that the most straightforward project objection to natural theology β is one that challenges the epistemic efficacy of theistic arguments, that is, that raises doubt about whether theistic arguments can be a source of knowledge of God or at least make a contribution to knowledge of God by conferring some positive epistemic status on theistic belief (for example, warrant, justification). Each of the models of natural theology β I discuss entails that theistic arguments are epistemically efficacious, and so arguments that challenge this constitute a fairly sweeping objection to natural theology β . However, my central thesis is that *none of the objections considered in the course of this book constitutes a good project objection to natural theology β* . The three objections I consider either fail to be project objections or are project objections but not good ones. At any rate, if the objections are so developed as to constitute project objections, they are either philosophically implausible or not an implication of Reformed theology. Either way, the objections fail to be both good and intrinsic to the logic of Reformed theology.

PART I
Natural Theology in the
Reformed Tradition

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Chapter 1

The Emergence and Evolution of the Reformed Endorsement of Natural Theology

Contrary to a widely held opinion in contemporary philosophy of religion, the Reformed theological tradition exhibits a deeply entrenched and historically continuous endorsement of natural theology. One of the contentions of the present work is that objections to natural theology, where they do arise within the tradition, are best understood in the light of the tradition's own positive, though complex, stance toward natural theology. So in preparation for the examination of Reformed objections to natural theology, in this chapter I provide an account of the emergence and development of the Reformed endorsement of natural theology from the period of the Reformation to the end of the nineteenth century.

The Reformation Period (1520–1564)¹

That which may be known of God is manifest in them, for God hath shown 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, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:19–20)

First Generation Reformers: Martin Luther (1483–1546), Huldreich Zwingli (1484–1531), and Martin Bucer (1491–1551)

In his lectures on Romans 1:19–21 (given in 1515 at the University of Wittenberg, Germany), Martin Luther maintained that the Apostle Paul affirmed that all people have some knowledge of God. Idolatry and false religion show this, for it is evident that all who worship idols “have a knowledge of divinity in their hearts.”² False religion presupposes some element of truth, which has been obscured and perverted. Luther says: “Thus they knew that the nature of divinity, or of God, is that He is powerful, invisible, just, immortal, and good. They knew the invisible

¹ For an extensive account of natural theology in the Reformation period, see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (4 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), vol. 1, chapter 6; vol. 3, chapters 3 and 4.

² Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia in Luther's Works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), vol. 25, p. 157.

things of God, His eternal power and Godhead.”³ While the pagans knew that there is *some* being who has these qualities, they incorrectly identified the bearer of these attributes and so falsely concluded that some being of their own imagination was God. Moreover, the general knowledge of God is a “natural knowledge of God,” because the invisible things of God “are recognized in a natural way from their effects.”⁴ Luther illustrates the inference:

One can see how one man helps another, one animal another, yes, how one thing helps and assists another. At all times the higher and the more privileged one helps or suppresses the lower and less privileged one. Therefore, there must be that in the universe which is above all and helps all.⁵

While the works of creation and providence manifest the attributes of God so that no person can plead ignorance of God, this is not a saving knowledge of God. In his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (1535), Luther makes this clear by distinguishing between general knowledge of God and true knowledge of God:

All men have the general knowledge, namely that God is, that He has created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punishes the wicked, etc. But what God thinks of us, what he wants to give and to do to deliver us from sin and death and to save us—which is particular and the true knowledge of God—this men do not know.⁶

Huldreich Zwingli, Reformer at Zurich, concurred with Luther about a universal knowledge of God in fallen persons on the basis of Romans 1:19–20. In his *Commentary on True and False Religion* (1525) he affirmed that all people have some knowledge of the existence of God, though they fail to know his character and thus fail to know Him or worship Him as they ought. Zwingli emphasized, though, that this universal knowledge of God’s existence comes from God Himself. It is not inherent in man or the product of his own unaided reasoning, “for *God* has revealed it unto them.”⁷ The tendency toward philosophical argument is more apparent in Zwingli’s *Providence of God* (1530), where he provides philosophical descriptions of the nature of God (for example, *summum bonum*, *primus motor*) and develops an account of divine providence by relying largely on logical arguments,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 156.

⁵ Ibid., p. 158.

⁶ Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and H.T. Lehman (St. Louis, MO: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–1976), vol. 26, p. 399.

⁷ Huldreich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1981), pp. 58–75.

typically citing Scripture at the conclusion of such arguments to confirm truths first established by philosophical argument.

Martin Bucer's *Commentary on Romans* (1536) provided a detailed exposition of the natural knowledge of God that relied heavily on Cicero's *De natura deorum*, specifically its Stoic epistemology and natural theology. Like Zwingli, Bucer begins by noting, "God gives knowledge of himself to all men,"⁸ as indicated by the biblical phrase, "God has revealed it to them." However, Bucer utilizes Stoic insights to explicate this. Appealing to the character Balbus in Cicero's *De natura deorum*, Bucer says there is a certain idea or conception of God (*notio dei*) impressed and fixed in the minds of all people, namely that the divinity has power over all things and is the highest good. That there is a God is innate, engraved on the soul and incapable of being expunged.⁹ Bucer says that the invisible attributes of God, signified by the locution "eternal power and Godhead," are clearly or certainly known, being gathered together from the visible world by the reasoning of the mind (*cogitatione mentis*). Thus the providential power and divinity of God can be inferred from the structure of the world (*machina mundi*), not just the existence of things but their magnitude, properties, actions, movement, and position.¹⁰ Bucer illustrates this with another appeal to Balbus, according to whom the ideas of the gods (*notiones deorum*) are formed in the mind by means of the phenomena of order in the cosmos, successful divination, divine blessings, and awe-inspiring natural events.

Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560)

While originally pessimistic about the extent to which human reason could know truth about God, Philip Melanchthon later changed his position and affirmed a natural knowledge of God.¹¹ This change is first evident in the 1532 edition of his *Commentary on Romans*. Commenting on Romans 1:20, Melanchthon says, "For in some manner reason naturally understands and possesses signs [*signa*] and arguments [*argumenta*] collected from God's works in the whole natural order. ... Hence we infer [*ratiocinamur*] the existence of God, by whom the natural order was founded."¹² What can be known about God in this manner is His *aeterna potentia*

⁸ Martin Bucer, *Metaphrases et enarrationes perpetuae Epistolarum D. Pauli Apostoli* (Basileae, 1562), 56f.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57b.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57c–d.

¹¹ See John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: the Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), chapter 2, and T.H.L. Parker, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans: 1532–1542* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), pp. 1–7, 84–99.

¹² Philip Melanchthon, *Römerbrief–Kommentar 1532*, ed. G. Ebeling and R. Schäfer, in Robert Stupperich (ed.) *Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1965), vol. 5, p. 73. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 18.

and *divinitas*, which Melanchthon understood to refer to the oneness, eternity, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, and infinite creating and sustaining power of God.¹³ While Melanchthon speaks of this knowledge as inferential, the ability to draw such inferences depends on the presence of a preconception (*prolepsis*) of God naturally implanted in the hearts of all people by God Himself.¹⁴

In the 1540 edition of the *Commentary on Romans*, Melanchthon provides nine theistic arguments designed to confirm and explicate the biblical claim that God can be known from the things He has made. While some of these arguments were briefly referenced in the 1532 edition—as testimonies (*testimonia*) to the existence and nature of God—here for the first time the arguments are stated and sequentially organized under their own distinct heading as one of Melanchthon’s five *propositiones* for Romans chapter one. Human rationality, the distinction between things honorable and dishonorable, social and political order, correct prophetic utterances of future events, and heroic impulses that transcend human nature each implies the existence of a superior mind or intelligence. The punishment of bad people and despotic governments indicates the providential control of some divine being over human life and political institutions. Moreover, God’s existence is evident since there is knowledge of God naturally implanted in the human mind.

Finally, Melanchthon includes two other arguments, one from cosmological order and another from the series of cause and effect in nature. The latter is stated as follows:

From the chain of causes. Causes are ordered in nature, so that it is necessary to go back to one first cause which is not set in motion from elsewhere, but moves the others. If it is the first, it is necessary that it have the power to move itself; therefore it is of infinite power. And it is necessary that there be a first one, for otherwise there would be no succession of causes if they were scattered endlessly.¹⁵

Consistent with Melanchthon’s humanistic background, most of his arguments are rhetorical rather than logically demonstrative.¹⁶ Only the argument from the “chain of causes” in nature resembles the demonstrative arguments of the

¹³ Melanchthon, *Römerbrief – Kommentar* 1532, pp. 71–2; see also Parker, *Commentaries*, pp. 97–8.

¹⁴ Melanchthon, *Römerbrief – Kommentar* 1532, pp. 71–2.

¹⁵ Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), pp. 78–9.

¹⁶ Rhetorical arguments are aimed at *persuasion* rather than *logical demonstration*, often employing various unstated premises that would be assumed by the audience. For example, some of Melanchthon’s arguments rely on the unstated premise ‘either phenomenon ϕ came about by chance or ϕ was caused by God.’ See also Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II.5, 16, 34–5. On the distinction between demonstrative and rhetorical proofs

medieval scholastics. The arguments tend to take phenomena of human experience and history as their starting points, as opposed to general physical facts about the universe such as order and cause and effect. As we saw in Bucer, there is a clear dependence on Cicero's *De natura deorum*, where we find the arguments from correct prophetic utterances, the universal idea of God, the utility of things for human and animal life, and the arrangement, beauty, and regular motion of the stars and planets.¹⁷ Hence Melanchthon's arguments are for the most part not the causal arguments encountered in Thomas Aquinas and the medieval scholastic tradition. Melanchthon himself notes the superiority of the former over purely causal arguments, since the latter only prove that God is creator, whereas the former reveal the nature of God and thereby reinforce the ethical emphasis that more generally characterizes Melanchthon's thought with its emphasis on divine law.

In the *Commentary on Romans* theistic arguments function as an elaboration and development of Romans 1:19–20. However, their usefulness for the Christian is at least suggested, for "it is useful for strengthening good opinions to hold fast to the true reasoning fixed in the mind which testify that God is the founder and preserver of things."¹⁸ The point is more dramatically made in the 1535 edition of the *Loci communes*, where the arguments are presented under the heading *De creatione*, a discussion of creation that draws heavily on Scripture and is clearly directed to Christian meditation:

After the mind has been confirmed in the true and right opinion of God and of creation by the Word of God itself, it is then both useful and pleasant to seek out also the vestiges of God in nature and to collect the arguments [*rationes*] which testify there is a God.¹⁹

He then clarifies the nature of this utility: "Now works must be presented to the faithful, first so that they may again increase that knowledge of God by God's Word, and next that they may make such knowledge brighter with the added signs which are impressed on nature."²⁰ So Melanchthon places an emphasis on theistic arguments as a means of strengthening and deepening the Christian's knowledge of God.

among Reformed theologians, see Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 173–4, 178–9, 185–7.

¹⁷ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II.1–5.

¹⁸ Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 77.

¹⁹ Melanchthon, *Opera quae supersunt omnia, Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. C.B. Bretschneider and E.H. Bindweil (28 vols, Halle and Brunswick, 1834–1960), vol. 21, col. 369. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, col. 370. Translation by Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, p. 20.