

RADICAL NATURAL THEOLOGIES FROM DUNS SCOTUS TO CHRISTIAN WOLFF

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Introduction

«Nature has perfections to show that it is an image of God, and defects to show that it is no more than an image of God»¹. In this juxtaposition of an affirmation and a negation, which respond to and complete each other, we can find the essence of natural theology. Nature is an image, but an image that never forgets to be an image, and indeed, through its defects, ceaselessly displays the distance that separates nature from that which it represents. Natural theology will therefore always be at the same time a theology *that takes nature as its guide* (whatever may be the meaning we assign to the term «nature») and a theology *that is aware of the limits of its discourse on God*. A theology that, precisely because it is founded on nature as the image of God, cannot fail to perceive its own perfections *but also* its own defects, its own capacity *but also* its own impotence in providing a discourse on God. From this follows the frequent, and somehow undue, superimposition of the *theologia naturalis* on the pure illustration of the *praeambula fidei*, that is, the demonstration of those truths that serve as an introduction to the understanding of the articles of faith, which is necessarily «other» and «ulterior»². But from this follows also the equally undue, but no less frequent, assimilation of the choice of taking nature as the guide of a discourse on God with the decision to elaborate this discourse using only but the natural forces of our intellect, without appealing to Revelation or any supernatural illumination³.

In this respect, the history of natural theology constitutes a specific chapter in the broader story of the relationship between philosophy and theology. This

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1. «La nature a des perfections, pour montrer qu'elle est l'image de Dieu, et des défauts, pour montrer qu'elle n'en est que l'image», Pascal, *Pensées*, Lafuma 934 – Sellier 762.

2. On the concept of «praeambula fidei» see *infra* our paper in this issue.

3. Cfr. Frigo 2020.

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is a well-known story. A series of extensive and detailed investigations conducted in recent years has pointed out the many historical and theoretical figures of a confrontation that admits of a plurality of forms: from inclusion to exclusion, from contrast to (almost) pre-established harmony, from servitude to the claim of independence, from mutual imitation to the mutual differentiation of methods and objects of enquiry⁴. However, the chapter constituted by the history of natural theology within this more general history of the relations between philosophy and theology has yet to be written. When and why did the term «*theologia naturalis*» impose itself as the name of a specific theological approach, or even as an autonomous theological discipline⁵? What developments has natural theology undergone in the course of its history, particularly in early modernity and in relation to the differentiation of confessional approaches⁶? Finally, how can we justify the renewed interest in natural theology which came about in the second half of the 20th century, after a long period of general discredit⁷? It is only in recent years that some answers to these questions have been attempted, and they seem essential for defining the history of natural theology from a purely historical and historiographical point of view.

To these questions can be added and intertwined numerous theoretical questions, which are no less essential and certainly more complex to resolve. Does the desire to base access to the divine on the consideration of nature necessarily imply the decision to have recourse exclusively to the natural forces of human intelligence, or is it possible to conceive of a natural theology even while admitting the radical impotence of reason deprived of supernatural illumination⁸? If the two books of nature and of the Bible are the work of one and the same divine *author*, do they admit (or even impose) for this reason two analogous forms of hermeneutics, or must the modalities of reading be rigorously distinguished⁹? More generally: is natural theology, in its most common sense of a kind of theology based on nature and relying solely on the natural powers of the human intellect, necessarily a theology for non-believers, with a propaedeutic and apologetic value, or does it also have a function for those who already embrace the truths of faith as believers¹⁰?

With a history of natural theology that still needs to be reconstructed in its chronological and conceptual stages, there are many possible paths of

4. See the two multi-volume syntheses published by Éditions du Cerf under the direction respectively of Bernard Lauret (*La théologie. Une anthologie*, 2010-2016, three volumes published of the six planned) and Philippe Capelle-Dumont (*Philosophie et Théologie*, 2009-2011, five volumes).

5. See *infra* the paper of Garreth Smith and the introduction of Frigo forthcoming.

6. See Armogathe 2007; Sudduth 2009; Woolford 2011; and Calloway 2014.

7. See Long 1992; Manning 2013; and De Cruz and De Smedt 2015.

8. See Frigo 2011.

9. In addition to the classical studies of Ernst Robert Curtius and Hans Blumenberg, see Herkommer 1986; Poirel 2002; Mews 2005; and above all Ohly 1995.

10. See Plantiga 1993; Plantiga 2009; and Van Inwagen 2006.

investigation. One could privilege the relationship between theology and philosophy and follow the transformation of natural theology into rational theology and then into fundamental theology, describing the parallel mutations experienced by Christian apologetics¹¹. Alternatively, one could focus on the function of nature as an image of the divine and show how the notions of image and figure should be articulated in order to express the imperfect character of the truth about God that nature can reveal¹². Or again, one could use as a guide the relationship between natural theology and natural philosophy, i.e. between theological discourse and scientific discourse on nature, and one could therefore ponder, for example, on the one hand about the theological effects of the decline of an artificialist approach based on final causality¹³, and, on the other hand, about the corollaries in the natural sciences of some theoretical options expressed by natural theology¹⁴.

In this monographic issue, however, we have decided to explore a different track, following the path of *radicality*. By radical natural theologies we mean those natural theologies that claim to prove *all* the truths of the Christian faith using *nothing but* the forces of pure natural reason. The adjective is justified by referring to a famous formula with which Montaigne defines the project of Raymond Sebond's *Theologia naturalis*: «Sebond's aim is a bold and courageous one, since he undertakes to establish against the atheists and to show by human, natural reason the truth of all the articles of the Christian religion» («Sa fin est hardie et courageuse, car il entreprend par raisons humaines et naturelles, établir et vérifier contre les athéistes tous les articles de la religion Chrétienne»)¹⁵. In the light of the determination of natural theology that we proposed at the beginning, this «courage» and «boldness» would certainly deserve to be rejected as a form of impudence or arrogance, indifferent to the limits of a discourse on God based on the necessarily imperfect image offered by nature. In fact, it is precisely when it seeks to emancipate itself from the paradox that defines its essence that natural theology comes to better assume this paradox, and thus to display more clearly and more consciously its own peculiar posture. To put it another way: it is only when the aim is *to prove everything* that the nature of the proof (and the naturally accessible proof) becomes the object of a thematic reflection within natural theology, which defines its scope and limits.

The projects of natural theologies that are intended to be *radical* thus bring to incandescence the Pauline aspiration to «make visible to the intelligence» the «invisible realities of God» starting «from His works» (*Rom. I, 20*, «Invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta, conspiciuntur [νοούμενα καθορᾶται]»). But it is precisely from this incandescence that emerges, as a residue, a more vivid awareness of what is

11. See Carraud 2020, chap. I-III.

12. See Marion 2020.

13. See Landucci 2005.

14. See Kusukawa 1995 and Harrison 2007.

15. Montaigne 2004, p. 440.

invisible that remains and resists beyond all the «invisibilia» that we have been able to contemplate through natural consideration. To put it another way: if the theologies analyzed in the papers presented in this issue never fully live up to the radicality of their ambitions, it is precisely this aspiration coupled with inadequacy that allows them to display more perfectly the structure of *any* natural theology. In this sense, Raymond Sebond's famous treatise confirms, in an unexpected but even more profound way, its paradigmatic function. For, as we have shown in detail elsewhere¹⁶, Sebond's method appears as a highly unstable compound of radical aspirations and awareness of the limits of such aspirations, the emblem of which is the unprecedented declination of the classic theme of the two books orchestrated by the Prologue. There is nothing accidental, therefore, in the fact that the first widely disseminated work, which was given the title of *Theologia naturalis*, is also an excellent example of *radical* natural theology. Rather, it is a confirmation that it is only by desiring (or hoping) to be radical that natural theology becomes more properly what it is.

The choice of favoring the path of radicality has imposed a double thematic corollary that it is worth pointing out here. On the one hand, and negatively, the natural theologies analyzed here are *naturally conceived* theologies rather than theologies conceived *from the observation of natural phenomena*. In other words, they will focus on the limits of man's natural faculties rather than on what nature is able to reveal about its Creator. Compared to many of the better-known natural theologies, whose starting point is the spectacle of nature as a vestige of a superior intelligence and wisdom, the radical natural theologies we will be dealing with appear far more abstract. In fact, the modality of the proof, the articulation of the concept, and the questioning of the limits of deduction become central.

The silence on a subject that at first sight seems inseparable from the very concept of natural theology is accompanied, on the other hand, by the centrality accorded to the question of the Trinity. The Trinity, the ultimate mystery that goes far beyond the preambles of faith, constitutes a sort of privileged test-bed for radical projects in natural theology. In the case of the Trinity, the very categories of human logic are challenged or radically transfigured by the application to the unity of the divine persons. In a masterly study, Friedman¹⁷ has recently shown how the evolution of debates on the intelligence of the Trinitarian mystery accompanies and in part determines the evolution of medieval conceptions of theology as a science. This observation becomes even more relevant in the case of natural theology, to such an extent that one could recognize in the decision to demonstrate *even* the Trinity and to do so without recourse to the revealed truths the distinctive quality of any radical natural theology. And conversely, the questioning of the limits of the

16. For this point and for an extensive presentation of Sebond's position and historical role, see the introduction to our edition of *Theologia naturalis* and its French translation by Montaigne (Frigo forthcoming).

17. Friedman 2010 and Friedman 2012.

demonstration of a truth of faith that is necessarily irreducible to a full rational understanding offers many authors the opportunity to reflect more generally on the limits of demonstrations even of truths that seem to belong to the *praeambula fidei*, and on the general value of analogical reasoning applied to dogmatic contents.

Despite the diversity of topics and approaches, the papers collected in the present issue seem to indicate a convergence of results that indirectly confirms the appropriateness of the approach we proposed. We would like, in conclusion, to underline only one element, which seems to us particularly relevant: the emergence of the unity of a «Scotist» tradition. The restructuring of the relations between theology and metaphysics imposed by Duns Scotus' noetics makes possible a natural theology that goes far beyond the limits of the *praeambula fidei*, minimizing the caesura that underlies the architecture of Thomas' two *summae* as well as the double regime of proof in the discussion of truths that belong to faith *per se* or only *per accidens*. The case of Bonetus, a Scotist and the first author of a *Theologia naturalis*, as well as later that of Saint-Ange in the mid-seventeenth century, serve as explicit confirmations. But one could also detect an effect of Scotist decisions in Malebranche's posture and perhaps also in the tensions that run through Christian Wolff's treatment of *theologia naturalis*. In this sense, the temporal scope of our study, from Scotus to Wolff, has been imposed almost naturally by virtue of its internal development. With the generation following that of Wolff, in fact, another epoch in the history of natural theology seems to be inaugurated, one that is in many ways indifferent to the radical projects outlined here.

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