

Natural Law, Natural Theology, and the Protestant Critique: Are We Really That Far Apart? (notes) Francis J. Beckwith

- I. The standard narrative (which happens to be wrong): The Catholic Church teaches that human beings are capable of knowing by unaided reason the existence and nature of both God and his moral law. Protestantism, on the other hand, maintains that our cognitive powers, so corrupted by sin, cannot provide to human beings the power to know God and his moral law apart from special revelation. The Catholic Church teaches that the deliverances of natural theology are preambles to faith, and thus implies that in order for faith to arise in the believer he must first know that God exists by way of his natural reason. On the other hand, Protestantism maintains that it is perfectly rational to have faith in God without the evidence of natural theology.
- II. The Natural Law
 - a. What is the Natural Law?: To say that a human being has the capacity to know the natural moral law is to say that there are normative guidelines for human action that are at their root *not* artefactual, and in that sense they are “natural.” To embrace the sort of natural law taught by the Catholic Church requires that one believes at least three propositions:
 - There are some universal and immutable truths
 - Human beings have the capacity to know these truths
 - Human nature is the basis on which these moral truths are known.
 - b. Natural law is the basis of legitimate positive law, e.g., King’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail
 - c. Natural law participates in the eternal law.
 - d. Natural law—without the divine law—is inadequate in directing human beings to their final end with God.
 - e. Natural law—though knowable and incapable of being fully eradicated, may be embedded in laws and customs that also include mistakes, both moral and metaphysical, e.g., abortion
- III. Protestant perspectives on the natural law
 - a. The frustrated fellow traveler. He is critical of the natural law because it has proved inadequate and unpersuasive in securing victory for social conservatism in the culture wars, e.g., Alan Jacobs
 - i. He makes a good point, but it is one also made by natural law advocates like St. Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic Church.
 - b. The *solo scripturist*. Because he wants to defend the integrity and uniqueness of the Bible’s message, he argues that natural law is a poor substitute for the sure and stable

deliverances of divine revelation. He also argues that when natural law advocates (like Aquinas and the Catholic Church) confidently claim to have established universal moral knowledge they understate the noetic effects of sin as taught in Scripture, e.g., Carl F. H. Henry.

- i. But once one attends to what Aquinas actually taught (and with which the *Catholic Catechism* is in full agreement), the distance between what Henry and other Reformed thinkers believe about the natural law and what Aquinas and the Church believe seems almost negligible.

IV. Natural Theology

- a. What is natural theology? – it is a philosophical project that maintains that one can acquire knowledge of the existence and nature of God by means of one’s rational faculties without the benefit of divine revelation. In the Catholic Church, this is a *de fide* dogma, meaning that it is an essential belief of the Church. As the First Vatican Council teaches: “The same Holy Mother Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certitude by the natural light of human reason from created things: `for the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.’”
 - i. All that the Church is saying is that the human mind has *the capacity* to know with certitude that God exists from his creation. One could, for a variety reasons, not exercise that capacity. It is not claiming what arguments work best, or whether natural theology even requires arguments!
- b. A Protestant perspective on natural theology: The Catholic Church maintains that natural theology is a necessary pre-condition for authentic faith, which makes acceptance of the Gospel message seemingly out of reach for most ordinary people, e.g., Carl F. H. Henry, Colin Brown, Norman Geisler.
 - i. This is a common misunderstanding of what the Church teaches. As Aquinas notes: “The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, *are not articles of faith*, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature, and perfection supposes something that can be perfected.” (*Summa Theologica* I.Q2, art. 2, ad. 2) (emphasis added)
 - ii. This is largely the result of interpreting the Catholic view of faith and reason through modern categories. Reformed philosophers (e.g., A. Plantinga) typically argue that belief in God requires no evidence to be rational, and thus present “faith” as a species of “reason” to critique modern unbelief. The Catholic view is different, though not necessarily contrary to the Reformed view.

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Recommended Readings

1. Carl E. Braaten, "Protestants and Natural Law," First Things (Jan. 1992), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1992/01/002-protestants-and-natural-law>
2. J Budziszewski, What We Can't Know: A Guide, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011)
3. J Budziszewski, Written On the Heart: The Case for Natural Law (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997)
4. Stephen J. Grabill, Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006)
5. Edward Feser, Five Proofs of the Existence of God (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017)
6. Carl F. H. Henry, "Natural Law and a Nihilistic Culture," First Things (Jan. 1995), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1995/01/natural-law-and-a-nihilistic-culture>
7. Arvin Vos, Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Thought (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985)