GRACE BIBLE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE FAILURE OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

BOOK REVIEW

SUBMITTED TO DR. JEFFERY D. JOHNSON

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BY

DAVID HACKER

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Johnson, Jeffrey D. *The Failure of Natural Theology: A Critical Appraisal of the Philosophical Theology of Thomas Aquinas*. Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2021.

In *The Failure of Natural Theology* Dr. Johnson clearly shows that natural theology faces a dilemma, due to the mixing of philosophy with theology, by describing the natural theologies of Aristotle and Pseudo-Dionysius and showing how Thomas Aquinas used them to form his philosophical theology which resulted in his non-biblical teaching of divine immobility that leads to a different god than the Trinity described in Scripture. Dr. Johnson demonstrates that the Trinity is necessary in order to rightly understand and balance God’s transcendence and immanence. This can only be done with a hermeneutic that uses Scripture to interpret Scripture (the analogy of the faith) rather than a hermeneutic based on, in Aquinas’s words, “a philosophical science that is built up by human reason” (p. 18).

Dr. Johnson demonstrates that to understand natural theologies dilemma one has to first understand that natural theology is not natural revelation. Natural revelation, which originates with God, is universally known by everyone, always efficacious—such that there are no honest agnostics or atheists, immediately or instantaneously known, continuously or perpetually presented to everyone, and, since it comes from God, infallibly true in what it tells us about God but does not reveal all there is to know about God. To the contrary, natural theology originates with man from an agnostic starting point and is not universally or efficaciously understood nor immediately and continuously known to all, and, being based on the reasoning of man, is fallible. Many in the church, especially today, conflate natural revelation with natural theology. In actually Aquinas rejected natural or general revelation completely and did not use it in the formulation of his philosophical natural theology. Dr. Johnson shows that it is possible to reject

natural theology and affirm natural revelation. “Natural theology seeks to obtain a philosophical knowledge of God by *suppressing* the knowledge of God that comes through natural revelation. . . . [I]f divine revelation is rejected, philosophers cease to have access to the knowledge needed to keep God’s transcendence and immanence in balance,” states Dr. Johnson (pp. 22-23). The God of natural theology ends up being one who either cannot create and relate, or cannot exist without creating and relating (p. 28).

Aquinas sought to fuse Aristotelianism with Christianity and ‘baptize’ the pagan philosopher into Christianity by mixing philosophy with theology. Aquinas posited three disciplines for knowing God: philosophy—based on science and reason, theology—based on grace and faith, and philosophical theology—based on reason and faith. “Aquinas alleged that philosophy and theology ought to be united because they can be mutually beneficial,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 41). Despite Aristotle’s writings being banned by the church at the time Aquinas was able to study them and determined that philosophy, in his opinion, can: identify truths accessible to both natural reason and divine revelation, provide reason and understanding for what is accepted by faith, and provide arguments to refute unbelievers, though it cannot prove articles of faith such as the Trinity and incarnation. “Aquinas used the Scriptures to critique the natural theology of his favorite philosopher, Aristotle, then used his own philosophical theology—a mixture of philosophy and theology— . . . as his biblical hermeneutic,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 45). Dr. Johnson argues that philosophy should not be mixed with theology because divine revelation is sufficient and any synthesis with philosophy is an inadvertent attack on the sufficiency of divine revelation. Because Aquinas’s philosophical theology came up with a few similarities to the God of the Bible he thought that both taught the same truths about God, but, as Dr. Johnson shows, similarities do not mean agreement. “Aristotle wouldn’t have recognized the God of the Bible (who can make free and unnecessary decisions) as the unmoved mover,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 49). Yet Aquinas embraced Aristotle’s unmoved mover and the concept of divine immobility, which resulted in a God that lines up with neither Aristotle nor the Bible.

Aristotle’s natural theology is rooted in the study of motion. He concluded that objects in motion are finite, temporal, composite, mutable, deficient, dependent, and eternal. Thus he developed the cosmological argument to reconcile the fact that motion and the material universe are eternal with the idea that motion and the universe have a first cause, which resulted in the unmoved mover being his God. For Aristotle, God is the final cause—but not the formal, material, or efficient cause—of the universe. The fact that he exerts no power or energy makes Him the first cause. He believed that the inherent desire of all moving objects was to be pure act, just as God was. Aristotle concluded that God “must be the precise opposite of all these deficient objects in motion,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 65). While there is some overlap in the attributes of Aristotle’s a*ctus purus* and the God of the Bible, such as divine simplicity and immutability, the unmoved mover falls short of being the personal and relatable God of the Bible that actively created the world out of nothing. Aristotle’s God is oblivious and unconcerned, cannot create, has no free will, and is impersonal. Thus, Aristotle’s God is deistic—in that he is oblivious to the universe, and pantheistic—in that the creation is both co-eternal and co-necessary.

Aristotle attempted to use the natural theology Pseudo-Dionysius, a neoplatonist, to adjust the philosophy of Aristotle in order to make it aline with Christianity. Dionysius sought to insert biblical terminology into the neoplatonic divine inflow and outflow framework such that salvation became “the process of being reunified and absorbed back into God—a blank state of consciousness,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 79). For Dionysius, “The Trinity, therefore, exists only as an outward and visible manifestation of the invisible and unknowable Godhead, who is beyond differentiations and relations,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 86). Sin, for Dionysius, is anything which moves away from God, rather than seeking to be reunified with God in the right way. He claimed to not want to add to or take anything away from Scripture, but he also asserted that God choose to use symbols and metaphors to reveal Himself via symbolic language. This lead to a form of mysticism which chose not to ascertain concrete knowledge of God but, rather, to experience God through divine unification. “For Dionysius, even God as Trinity gets swallowed up in God’s transcendence [thus] Dionysius’s natural theology leads neither to an absolute God nor to a personal God who created the world out of nothing,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 94).

Thomas Aquinas’s philosophical theology followed Aristotle in believing that all knowledge originates with sense experience. Aquinas quotes philosophers almost twenty times more than he does the Apostle Paul, which reveals a lot about his view of the sufficiency of Scripture. Aquinas, following Aristotle's way of negation, claimed that “God is altogether without motion” (p. 97), which put immobility at the heart of his doctrine of God due to His transcendence, but it could tell him nothing about God’s immanence. Thus, he turned to Dionysius’s way of causation—“we can at least know something about the unknowable God by knowing something about what God created” (p. 101) to make Aristotle’s God, who is unable to be the efficient and moving cause of the cosmos, compatible with Christianity. Yet, without any explanation, “Aquinas claimed that God is both the *unmoved* mover and the *moving* cause of objects in motion,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 101). This lead Aquinas to affirm that there is an analogous relationship between God and all created things such that in creating “God has painted a symbolic picture of himself” (p. 103). For Aquinas God is immanent because he is represented in everything He created and thus everything has something to say about God. Even Scripture was just a symbolic way of knowing truths about God for Aquinas. In the end Aquinas was a mystic, like Dionysius, who claimed that God is really unknowable so we must use philosophy in order to interpret theology.

Dr. Johnson shows that the fatal flaw of Aquinas’s natural theology is that “Divine immobility cannot be reconciled with the God of the Bible because it is inherently incongruent with the God of the Bible” (p. 114). Divine immobility is at the heart of Aquinas’s philosophy and theology, but it is not a necessary conclusion in order for God to be the final cause of the universe nor consistent with God being the efficient cause or governor of the universe. “What Aristotle assumed, Aquinas treated as a fact . . . that a first cause without motion exists in the metaphysical realm,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 116). Yet, as Dr. Johnson shows, this is not a necessary conclusion as God could be self-moving. Natural theology must depend on divine revelation to know anything more than that God exists, much less the fact that there might be *ad intra* movement within the trinitarian Godhead. For Aquinas God is *actus purus* and “will never do anything more than what he has always been doing from all eternity” (p. 119). Yet, creation would be necessary for God to be God if He is identical to His creative acts. The logical conclusion of Aquinas’s position is pantheism, which he rejected by claiming, as an article of faith, that the universe was created out of nothing. He could not easily reconcile this with his Aristotelian philosophy which results in the dilemma of how the universe can be temporal—as Christianity affirmed, and not eternal—as Aristotle claimed. He had to admit that this could not be proven by reason, but only from Scripture. Even if it is granted that God is the immobile moving cause of the universe this motionless God cannot interact with a universe in constant motion. Aristotle’s immobile God can’t know, love, relate, or interact with the temporal affairs of man because He cannot even have knowledge of the universe. He can only eternally contemplate Himself. Likewise, even “if we accept that the unmoved mover knows all things in a single, undifferentiated act of self-awareness, the problem remains of how God can govern all the particular things,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 132). There is no room for Aristotle’s God to providentially act in the universe. Rather than realize that Aristotelian philosophy is incompatible Aquinas attempted to resolve these conflicts by trying to apply the laws of physics that operate in the finite universe to an infinite God which they do not apply to. “[B]ecause God is triune, he is unlike anything in the cosmos . . . It may just be possible for God to be the only being that is self-moving,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 133). Aquinas’s fatal flaw was his failure to reject Aristotle’s cosmological argument all together and rely on divine revelation alone. This resulted in him adding an attribute to God’s nature which is not revealed in Scripture.

“Thomas wanted to have it both ways—a God without differentiation and a God with differentiation,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 138). Thus, he defines God’s nature from the foundation of sense experience and then defines the Trinity from divine revelation, because he realized that philosophy could only take him so far. Natural theology says that there is no differentiation in God’s essence and knowledge or will and actions. Revealed theology shows that there is differentiation within the mind (generation of the Son) and will (procession of the Spirit) of God such that the Trinity consists of three differentiations within God. Aquinas seeks to reconcile this by presenting a differentiation that is so perfect that it can’t really be a differentiation at all and then moves on without commenting on this fact (p. 145). Aquinas sought to subject Scripture to his own philosophical rules of interpretation which “leads his readers into a maze of irresolvable contradictions,” concludes Dr. Johnson (p. 150).

In the end, the Trinity is vitally necessary to a properly balanced understanding of God’s immanence and transcendence in which both unity and diversity are equally ultimate. For Aquinas the simplicity of God was ultimate because he placed his assumption that all knowledge comes from sense experience before the consultation of revealed theology. This leads to the Trinity becoming more or less an afterthought for Aquinas. If oneness is ultimate a knowable and relatable God is ruled out. In order to combat this difficulty open theists go to the other extreme and make God’s diversity ultimate and in the end “God is so much like us that he ceases to be independent of us” (p. 158). The biblical picture is that simplicity and diversity are equally ultimate such that “*the one* and *the many* are equally ultimate in God” (p. 158). The three persons in the Godhead are eternally and intrinsically distinct such that God is both absolute and personal. Only the Trinity explains a self-moving God. “The Trinity is the only being (because he is both one and many) who can move himself *ad intra*,” states Dr. Johnson (p. 161). Likewise, only the Trinity allows for a temporal universe. Aquinas attempted to reconcile divine immobility with God being the efficient cause of the temporal universe when the simple answer was to “throw out Aristotle’s unmoved mover and put the Trinity in its place,” (p. 163) which is the only way to explain a knowable, absolute, and relatable God that is both transcendent and immanent.

Natural theology is absurd in that without the Trinity everything falls apart. The cosmological argument is the fatal flaw of Aquinas’s philosophical theology due to it’s insistence on divine immobility. “[O]nly the Trinitarian God of the Bible can make sense of the universe and the laws of nature,” concludes Dr. Johnson (p. 172).