A Dialogue with Barth: The Problem of Natural Theology, The Problem of Natural Theology, The Natural Knowledge of God as a Transcendental Condition of Faith

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Translator’s Note

My translation of these excerpts from Father Henri Bouillard’s study of Karl Barth’s theology (Paris: Aubier, Editions Montaigne, 1957) first appeared in the spring, 1968 issue of Cross Currents. They represent the following excerpts from the original French edition, and are a part of a larger translation of 315 pages I have translated from the original French edition.

1. “A Dialogue with Barth: The Problem of Natural Theology,” (pp. 203–208 of Cross Currents; pp. 11–17 of the original French text). This excerpts consists of Father Bouillard’s Introduction to Volume Two. It sets the focus and tone for what is to follow in Volumes Two and Three of his study.


3. “The Natural Knowledge of God as a Transcendental Condition of Faith.” (pp. 216–226 of Cross Currents; pp. 100–112 of the original French text) Father Bouillard’s criticism of Karl Barth’s position, and his defense of the Catholic viewpoint on the status and importance of natural theology for Christian theology. This section also includes Father Bouillard’s understanding and interpretation of the view on natural theology promulgated at the first Vatican Council.

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A DIALOGUE WITH BARTH: THE PROBLEM OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

The Importance of Barth

By responding to the Roman procurator who was about to condemn Him to death with the words, "My Kingdom is not of this world," Jesus affirmed the transcendence of human destiny and thereby brought about a split in the consciousness of His followers: the kingdom of God is opposed to the world, the eschaton to time, nature to grace. From that day forward, the problem of their relations became a fundamental one. It completely penetrates all Christian thought and at the same time it marks the frontier along which that thought communicates with the external world. It concerns, at one and the same time, the Church in her own life, the Christian in his secular activity, the unbeliever in his dialogue with the believer, and the philosopher in his encounter with Christianity.

Ever present and multiform, its crystallization assumes a special aspect in each new age. During the past thirty years we have seen debated within or on the margins of Catholicism the questions of Christian humanism, Christian philosophy, and man's longing for the supernatural. Still more recently we have witnessed debates about the Church and earthly realities, about history and eschatology. At the very same time questions of a similar order have been under discussion—although from a rather different perspective—within the bosom of German-speaking Protestantism. "Dialectical theology" proclaims the radical opposition between man and God, between time and eternity. Among and concerning the protagonists of dialectical theology, however, there has arisen a dispute over "natural theology," which has extended, on the one hand, to the question of the basis for the Christian's political ac-

Henri Bouillard is a distinguished French Jesuit theologian, author of a monumental three-volume study of Karl Barth, published by Editions Aubier, Paris. The present article offers, with the permission of the publisher, two sections from this indispensable work. The first is the Introduction to volume two, in which Father Bouillard indicates the importance of Barth's work for contemporary Catholic thought and states the method and spirit with which he plans to approach it. The second section of our article consists of an exposition of Barth's reasons for rejecting "natural theology"—and more specifically for rejecting the central formula on this subject announced at the First Vatican Council—and also of Bouillard's response to this criticism.
tivity and, on the other hand, to the question of the existential interpretation of the evangelical message.

In taking up the basic problems which are today, as before, the meeting-ground for the exchange between nature and grace, we have thought it well to do this in the form of a dialogue with Karl Barth. There are two advantages to this procedure. On the one hand, the radical position adopted by Barth demands radical reflection on our part. On the other hand, because Barth deals in his work with the whole of the Christian tradition and defines his positions with regard to a number of theologians and philosophers, he affords us the opportunity to envisage the same problems from various perspectives.

In the course of an earlier volume, we have retraced the genesis and the evolution of dialectical theology and, in particular, we have analyzed the development of Barthian thought from its beginnings down to the Church Dogmatics. Here we shall be considering the content of the Church Dogmatics (and of several other short studies by Barth published in the same period insofar as they are concerned with what he calls the encounter between nature and grace; or concretely, the encounter between man and the Word of God). The reader should be careful to avoid seeing our book as simply a study of Karl Barth. What we are presenting here, in the form of a dialogue with a great theologian, is a reflection on a body of problems which all Christian thought necessarily entails.

We explained in our earlier work (and we shall have occasion to repeat) that for Barth the Word of God, identical with grace, is God Himself acting and revealing Himself in Jesus Christ; there is no other link between God and man than that which is established by this word and we have no other means of knowing this link but the witness to Jesus Christ which is given by the Bible, the witness which is the theme of all Church preaching. To study what is usually termed the relation between nature and grace is for Barth to study under its various aspects the relation between man and God as set forth and made manifest in Jesus Christ. Let us listen to this significant statement:

...Starting with Jesus Christ and with Him alone, we must see and understand what in the Christian sense is involved by the mighty relationship... God and man. What we mean by that can only be declared adequately by confessing that 'Jesus is Christ,' and as for what is involved in the relationship between creation and the reality of existence, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the Church, redemption, God, that can never be understood from any general truth about our existence, nor from the reality of the history of religion; this we can only learn from the relation between Jesus and Christ. Here we see clearly what is meant by 'God above man' (Article I) and 'God with man' (Article III). That is why Article II, Christology, is the touchstone of all knowledge of God in the Christian sense, the touchstone of all theology. 'Tell me how it stands with your Christology and I shall tell you who you are.'
This is the point at which ways diverge and the point at which is fixed the relation between theology and philosophy and the relation between knowledge of God and knowledge of men, the relation between revelation and reason, the relation between Gospel and Law, the relation between outer and inner, the relation between theology and politics. At this point everything becomes clear and unclear, bright or dark. For here we are standing at the centre.

This text (and one could cite many similar ones) is a vigorous expression of Barth's fundamental thought. It reminds us of the following famous passage from Pascal:

Not only do we know God by Jesus alone, but we know ourselves only by Jesus Christ. We know life and death only through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ, we do not know what is our life, nor our death, nor God, nor ourselves.

But Barth goes further. Whereas for Pascal the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is a response to the question which man asks himself concerning his existence, Barth refuses to consider human existence otherwise than as already included in the Word of God. Theology, he says, in all its parts is the presentation of the reality of the Word of God, which appeals to man and reforms him. Here, therefore, it is a question of the relation between God and human existence. But this is not just any relation; rather it is that particular relation which establishes the Word of God. Theology has no power to exalt itself above this Word and cannot, rather than allow itself to be instructed solely by the Word, borrow from science and human reflection an autonomous consideration of man in general. Theology knows human reality only insofar as that reality is included in the Word of God. It is impossible to treat God and man as two realities, situated on the same level, which might be coordinated or be in continuity with each other and interchangeable, or between which there could exist a relationship of tension, as between two poles. The relationship of man to God is not the relation of a subject to an object, but that of a predicate to a subject; that is to say, man never possesses his reality in himself and separately, but only insofar as that reality is grounded in the reality of the Word of God; in other words, only insofar as his reality subsists in Jesus Christ.

Here we are at the core of Barth's "christological concentration," setting him in opposition to what he calls the theology of modern Protestantism (with Schleiermacher as the prototype), which construes the encounter of man with God as consisting of a religious experience amenable to historical and psychological study and as actualizing a religious faculty innate in man in general. By the same token, he also opposes Catholic doctrine insofar as it accepts human cooperation in man's relations with God and, in consequence, accepts a natural knowledge of God, a natural morality, etc. Finally, he is opposed to all attempts to conceive of the Word of God as the answer to a question
which is asked by man himself, as well as to all attempts to base theology upon a philosophy of existence. Thus he would have criticized Pascal if he had thought of mentioning him. Indeed, he separates himself from those with whom at first he collaborated, notably from Emil Brunner and Rudolf Bultmann, rejecting the former's program of "Christian natural theology" (which Brunner later modified) and condemning the latter's use of Heidegger's philosophy. Barth admits that earlier in his career, under the influence of Kierkegaard, he himself helped to introduce "existential philosophy" into the household of theology via The Epistle to the Romans. His Dogmatics in Outline also bears the mark of this tendency, and he could have been reproached for basing dogmatics conjointly upon the Word of God and existential philosophy, thus wavering between the Word and existence. Later, he tells us, he came to understand that this was only another version of neo-Protestant theology. But from the Church Dogmatics onward, human existence is envisaged by Barth solely within the Word of God—that is, in dependence upon Jesus Christ.

The discussion of Barthian thought will lead us, therefore, to a triple confrontation; first, with the theology of "modern Protestantism"; secondly, with Catholic theology; and finally with philosophical reflection and the thought of those theologians who accord a more important role to it than does our author. The first of these will occupy us only in an accessory way. Barth himself, for many years now, has shown less and less interest in lingering to combat forms of thought which he himself has helped to push into the discard. It is the other two confrontations which will concern us. Often they will be interconnected, for it is in the name of the same principles (solus Christus, sola gratia, sola Scriptura) that Barth rejects both certain Catholic theses and a certain manner of accommodating philosophy.

It is important that we indicate clearly the spirit in which this discussion will be carried on. Our role is not to pass judgment, but to establish a dialogue. We shall thereby enable a voice to be heard in which some, we hope, will be able to recognize an echo of their own thought, while others, perhaps, will find in it an occasion for making their thought more precise.

Barth has declared that dogma ought to adopt a resolutely confessional attitude (konfessionelle Haltung). Not in the sense that it should abandon its concern for the entire Church, but because it cannot be simultaneously Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, neo-Protestant, and Evangelical, possessing an ecumenical scope by virtue of its interconfessional character. Faithfulness to the Word of God demands the confessional evangelical attitude; that is, a stand based upon the Church as she was purified and restored by the reformers of the 16th century. Any other attitude will be excluded as heretical. Moreover, Barth considers it normal for Catholics to adopt the same "intolerant" pre-
supposition in their controversy with Protestantism. He states that on this basis the discussion can develop in a humanly dignified and Christian manner, that there is no other way in which the confessions can take each other seriously, and that only this dogmatic intolerance permits an authentic and fruitful dialogue, for only in this way is there something to say to one another between confessions. How can one help but respond to Barth’s honesty with similar frankness on our part? Inevitably, wherever Barth expressly opposes Catholic doctrine our discussion will take on the aspect of a controversy between Catholicism and Protestantism, but we shall be at pains to avoid, as he has been, any narrowly sectarian spirit. “The only dogmatics,” he says, “which can speak convincingly to the whole Church is one which is seriously aware of its responsibility towards the whole Church, so that it is not concerned with any idiosyncracies and peculiarities, but with the one which is universally valid.”

If we cannot escape debate, we shall not, however, make of it the principal object of our efforts. The angle under which we have chosen to study Barthian thought has led us to neglect (or very nearly) those questions with reference to which the differences between Catholics and Protestants are most obvious: the structure of the Church, the relation between Scripture and tradition, the understanding of the sacraments, Marian doctrine, etc. Our attention will be occupied with questions of a wider nature which are, generally speaking, situated on the frontiers between theology and philosophy. Often, too, they are questions which divide the theologians within each confession as much as they divide one confession from another. Especially is this true where Barth is concerned. In criticizing the theses and even the problematics which have been almost classical within the household of Protestantism, he has encountered sharp opposition among Lutherans and even among his fellow-Calvinists. Conversely, he has met with attention and sympathy from many Catholic theologians because of his efforts toward a Christocentric theology. He himself states that despite their differences concerning the Church, the Pope, Mary, and the sacraments, some of his Catholic friends seem to share with him on this point a better understanding than many Protestant theologians. All of this invites us to step forth beyond the limitations of the polemic between Catholicism and Protestantism. In fact, we decided to do this at the very outset of our research. It was not as a witness to Protestantism that the theological work of Barth first attracted our attention, but because it is the most comprehensive and original work that has been seen in Christianity’s mansions for a long time. It seems to us that it would be instructive to interrogate it and let ourselves be interrogated by it, with a view to attaining a better understanding through the ensuing dialogue.

This dialogue, it goes without saying, will be carried on with Barth’s premises as the starting-point. Since he admits as norm and sole ultimate
criterion the Word of God attested in Scripture, we shall attach a
decisive importance to an examination of the biblical affirmations upon
which he bases his essential theses. We shall refer to Creeds and Coun-
cils, moreover, only to the extent that he himself acknowledges their
validity. (Except where we do so in order to draw attention to an
inaccurate interpretation of a proposition that he has rejected.) When
we cite the thought of a particular Catholic theologian, we shall do so
in the light of Barth’s perspectives. He mentions quite frequently the
thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, sometimes approvingly and sometimes
to reject it. If he takes a particular interest in the Thomist system,
he does not do so, on the whole, because it constitutes a distinct system
at the heart of Catholic theology; but rather because and insofar as he
sees it as a clear-cut and typical formulation of a tradition which
originated with the Fathers of the Church and has prolonged itself into
the present age, even in certain sectors of Protestant theology. When we,
in turn, shall introduce the thought of St. Thomas, in general it will
be that same tradition which will interest us rather than the Thomist
system as such.

In the course of this study, we shall strive to maintain an attitude
of receptivity and liberty, in accordance with Barth’s own invitation to
his readers: “[W]e are not here to agree with one another and to applaud
one another. If there are Barthians, then I am not one of them. We
are here to learn from one another, mutually to make the best of
what we present to one another in a literal way, in order then to
pursue one’s own way... But just to that end, it is necessary for us to
understand one another.” Our efforts here will be directed toward
the comprehension and explanation of Barth’s thought. Our account will
be analytical rather than argumentative in order that, on the basis of
these analyses, the reader may be able to form a judgment which differs
from ours, to reject what we accept or to accept what we discard—in
short, to trace his own path. For we do not claim that either from the
standpoint of philosophy or from that of Catholic philosophy the road
we have marked out excludes all others.

The Problem of Natural Theology

Barth does not consider the only theme of natural theology to be the
natural knowledge of God. As many Protestants do, and as the Deists and
their theological adversaries once did, Barth ascribes a broader meaning
to the term “natural theology” than Catholic philosophers and theolo-
gians ordinarily do. He includes, among other things, all doctrines con-
cerning man and all moral doctrines which lay claim to defining a
relationship to God independent of Christian Revelation. It is the
meaning of the term and not its actual use which is found to be strictly
circumscribed. Natural theology for Barth “is the doctrine of union of
man with God existing outside God's revelation in Jesus Christ." Clearly it includes a theory of the knowledge of God and the knowability of God on which all else depends. In the passage referred to above, the term "natural theology" refers directly to this theory.

Natural theology is concerned with knowing if man may possibly know God, apart from what has been communicated to him from Divine Revelation through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In other words, is there a natural way of knowing God? Barth answers that it is radically and incontestably impossible in the sphere of the Church; he holds that natural theology has a legitimate function neither in the field of Christian preaching nor in a theology of the Word of God, and that consequently a Christian natural theology cannot be seriously considered. This denial is not based on a direct criticism of the doctrine in question. Whoever takes natural theology seriously and considers it in itself has already yielded to its influence, says Barth; to argue against it is already to be a victim of it. We will see why! But in fact, he adds, the conflict is already over; natural theology has already been surmounted when it is approached by a person who understands the Word of God in the Scriptures. Such a person would actually have seen, on one hand, that the Word of the true God, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, the Creator, the Reconciling God and Redeemer, is knowable to us only through the grace of revelation in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit; and, on the other hand, that the power of knowing this God belongs to man not according to what he is in himself, but rather in the measure that he exists in Jesus Christ. These two theses would exclude at the outset any possibility of a natural knowledge of the true God, even before one has confronted the question of such knowledge. The reason for approaching the subject is not for the purpose of discussing it, but simply in order to become aware of the factual judgment which the Word of God already conveyed.

Barth first shows how in his view the Catholic thesis, authorized by Vatican Council I, is in opposition to biblical Revelation. Next he asks: how is it possible for natural theology, in spite of its obvious impossibility and its radical spuriousness, to reassert itself constantly in the bosom of the Church and Christian theology? This provides an occasion for him to discuss the various arguments put forward to justify it: its factual existence, its pastoral usefulness, and its scriptural evidence. He sees all of these arguments as involving inconsistencies and he finds himself forced to look elsewhere for the reason for the vitality of natural theology. He finds it finally in the forcefulness of human nature asserting itself against grace. Here the circle of thought is completed and it returns to its point of departure; one understands why natural theology has no right of citizenship in the Church: The very reason for its vitality is also the reason for its illegitimacy.
1. Natural Theology as a Natural Phenomenon

That natural theology exists is a fact. In the course of history it re­­­­appears again and again in new forms, either outside or inside the Church. Far from minimizing the role actually played by it in Christian thought, Barth tends rather to magnify it. Since post-apostolic times, he notes, in the Church of the martyrs, Christians have used it in their polemics against paganism. The Doctor of Grace, St. Augustine, relied upon it. It developed in the Middle Ages with the rediscovery of Aristotelianism, and Vatican I canonized St. Thomas' teaching on natural theology. Even the Reformers, inconsistent in this respect with their doctrine of grace and the scriptural principle, have not radically ex­­cluded the idea of a natural knowledge of God. Their successors made of it a necessary prefatory matter for all dogma. In the 18th Century, the domination which natural theology had long exercised covertly burst into the open with the Enlightenment and Pietism, and it seemed to become the central doctrine of Christianity. And since then, even within Protestant theology, there has not been a single attempt at re­­­­newal which has not compromised itself by making appeal to natural theology, openly or not.26

If it be true that natural theology is condemned by Revelation and constitutes a "violation of the Christian concept of God,"27 how (asks Barth) has it happened that it reaffirms itself unceasingly in the bosom of Christian theology?

The explanation which he gives for it, in the course of a very laborious development, is summarized in these words: "The vitality of natural theology is the vitality of man as such."28 It has been mentioned above that natural man, even the Christian, fights against grace, and his apparent openness to grace is tantamount to a blindness towards it. An irresistible impulse brings him to assert, to understand and to justify himself. This attempt necessarily ends in the affirmation that he can know God without the Grace of God.29 In attempting to resolve for himself the riddle of his own existence and that of the world, he sees, at the origin and goal of his endeavor, an ultimate purpose, which he considers his God.30 Before it becomes explicit, this natural theology is experienced by him in the act of his own self-affirmation (Selbst­­­­behauptung). In order to negate it, he would first have to deny himself.31

Radically hostile to grace and blind to his real need of it, man as such has no choice: natural theology constitutes his only possibility; it enjoys in this respect a real monopoly. Therefore the astonishing thing about natural theology is not the fact that it reaffirms itself unceasingly, even within the Church, but that it tolerates along with itself a theology of Revelation which it recognizes as pre-eminent, while limiting itself to playing the role of Praeambula fidei. But this tolerance
and modesty is only apparent. Far from renouncing its monopoly, natural theology triumphs here more than ever. In view of the fact that natural theology abandons its position and accords pre-eminence to revelation, it assimilates revelation and renders it harmless; natural theology converts questions asked by man into answers given by man. By choosing revelation as his possibility, man comprehends it and disposes of it. Placed beside a natural knowledge of God, even if such knowledge be considered only as a prefatory matter, Revelation no longer remains a manifestation of God; rather it has been but a term improperly employed as an object of human reflection. The miracle of grace is changed into a marvelous element of human nature. To the extent that it is chosen by man, supranaturalism is only a masked naturalism. When man chooses revelation as one of his possibilities among others, instead of considering it as the only possibility which he may not choose, and as that by which he himself is chosen, the theology of revelation becomes mostly natural theology.

This process of absorption and domestication is not peculiar to a particular sect or an heretical movement; it takes place in the Church at every moment when the Gospel, instead of remaining a gift from God, becomes an element of national life, social life, family life and general culture. The triumph of natural theology is to make the Gospel respectable. The Christian is on guard against grace, and knows that his success in evading grace is all the greater if, instead of outrightly contradicting it, he adapts it to himself. In this respect, he is "hopelessly bourgeois." As its name indicates, natural theology is the theology from which man comes when he starts from nature, and which he still puts into effect as a Christian in making the Gospel respectable, thus rendering it innocuous and even exploiting it in the conflict against grace which is man's own deepest and innermost reality. Its vitality stems from the fact that even in the midst of the Church, it is the theology which is natural to us all.

We can now understand why Barth feels that as soon as one places himself on this terrain, that of man as such, natural theology wins ground; for it can always furnish arguments to justify itself. But this ground, the author adds, has no consistency; "the presupposed independent existence of man as such is an illusion"—invincible as long as one makes an abstraction of Jesus Christ, but obvious as soon as He is taken into consideration. Man as such is in Jesus Christ the man taken up and accepted by God in the war of grace against man's enmity toward grace; in his corruption, he has no claim to be solemnly considered or attacked. "The truth of his existence is simply this—that Christ has died and risen again for him." The Christian message thus automatically and radically cuts off all forms of natural theology.

Far from fighting it, an authentic theology will concede to natural theology a certain necessity and justification. In reality, it knows that
it is a necessary undertaking for man considered as such and that in wanting to take it from him, we would be attacking his very existence. One must be merciful and understand that it is natural man's only comfort. To believe that one can divert him from natural theology would still be compromising with it. The illusion that we can disabuse ourselves of this illusion is the greatest illusion of all.39

There is only one thing which one may never reconcile with natural theology: that it may have a legitimate function in the sphere of the Church. Christian preaching and theology cannot seriously consider Jesus Christ and man as such at the same time. That infringes upon the exclusive Lordship of Christ. Christian preaching and theology takes Jesus Christ seriously and man only to the extent that he is in Christ. They will proclaim to the world that we can only know God through His grace.40

Thus the circle of Barth's thought is completed. Having from the beginning learned from the Word of God of the prohibition of all natural theology, it returns to this prohibition after having understood its meaning: what renders natural theology impossible and illegitimate is that very thing which explains its vitality—our knowledge of the self-affirmation of man the sinner.

One notices that it is neither through agnosticism nor a critique of knowledge that Barth rejects the possibility of a natural knowledge of the true God, but in the name of biblical revelation. How is it, he asks, that man, who seeks to solve by himself the mystery of his existence, through the knowledge of a first principle and last end, fails to succeed in his endeavor? Our whole existence gives evidence that we can know "God." But, from the biblical standpoint, this "God" whom we know is an idol (ein Götze).41 Every idea conceived with the pretension of being the idea of God simply describes a false god; even the pure idea of Plato is no exception, simply because it is pure.42

Outside of revelation, what we call our knowledge of God could only be a projection of sinful man, on an infinite and absolute plane.43 Barth illustrates this affirmation with examples from modern philosophy and modern theology. When Kant defined God as a necessary idea of theoretical reason and an equally necessary postulate of practical reason, what did he do but speak specifically of man, and of what constitutes the basis of man's reason? Hegel, too, speaks forcefully of God. When he describes Him as the process of absolute spirit, which exists eternally in itself, which eternally proceeds from itself, and which, existing in itself and outside itself, is eternally the same, we have a forceful and profound presentation of the movement of nature and spirit which proceeds from ourselves and returns to ourselves. But it is not a description of God, whose movement is infinitely more than our self-movement even when the latter is hypostatized, i.e., projected into eternity; the movement of God necessarily forbids and prevents any
such hypostatization and projection. Schleiermacher and Ritschl have also spoken of God forcefully, but what they are describing is really man’s religious consciousness. Thus, Barth brings to bear Feuerbach’s criticism to which he explicitly refers: “Theology as anthropology—that is to say, the object of religion, which we call God . . . expresses nothing but man’s essence; in other words, man’s God is nothing other than man’s essence deified.” Barth, of course, does not consider this verdict as definitive, and to the extent that he does, his is quite a different point of view from that of Feuerbach. But he sees there a question posed to all theology and feels that Feuerbach’s condemnation cannot be escaped if our ability to know God is based on anything other than revelation.

Can we describe the thesis here sustained as fideism? Yes and no; it all depends on the meaning one gives to the word. The different doctrines which the Catholic Church has condemned in the course of the 19th century as “Fideist” (those of Lammenais, Bonald, Bautain and others), or those which have been suspected as such elsewhere, generally base their denial of a natural knowledge of God not only on the doctrine of original sin, but also, and often from the very outset, on a theory of human knowledge (as in traditionalism, positivism or Kantianism). Although in certain polemical passages Barth offers some reasons of a philosophical nature, they do not constitute a decisive element in his intention. The basis of his thesis is the Lutheran and Calvinistic doctrine of the corruptibility of human nature and justification by faith alone. Therefore, if one wishes to speak of fideism, it is in this context that the term must be understood and defined.

The truth of the matter is that Barth has returned to the position of the Reformers. As he has noted several times, they did not absolutely condemn all natural knowledge of God. They attacked and persecuted the “justification by works” in the moral domain; they also did this in the intellectual sphere, but not with the same acuity. The Reformers failed to declare that the scriptural principle and justification by faith alone excluded all natural theology. For Barth, this is an inconsistency; in order to remain faithful to the principles of the Reformers today, it is necessary to carry their thought to its logical consequences.

One should guard against replying to one radical doctrine by resorting to another. The Catholic theologian who would reject Barth’s thesis without reservation would be unfaithful to his own tradition.

The First Vatican Council, while affirming the basic possibility of knowing God by the natural light of reason, makes a qualification to which Barth fails to advert. “According to divine Revelation,” it affirmed, “those truths of divine reality which are not in themselves inaccessible to human reason, may, even in the present state of humanity, be known to all, without difficulty, with a firm certitude and without mixture of error.” Thus the Council distinguishes a basic possibility,
inherent in human reason as such, from an actual possibility whose realization, in the present state of humanity, depends on divine revelation. In order to understand the significance of this declaration, it is necessary to refer to the Acts of the Council and notably to the report in which the text which they were going to sanction was explained to the Fathers of the Council. "The second paragraph of Chapter Two," the report reads, "treats of the necessity of revelation... under two aspects: (1) in what concerns the natural knowledge of God, and (2) in what concerns the supernatural order." Under the second aspect, the necessity for Revelation is "absolute", since it is a question of making man understand his supernatural end and the divine benefits to which God invites man to share fully. Under the first aspect, revelation is not absolutely necessary, since here it is a question of things which are not as such inaccessible to human reason. It is necessary to speak of a "moral or relative" necessity, linked to the present condition of humanity. It is no longer here a question of the "power" (potentia), even if it be an active power, of knowing God, but of the actual knowledge of God (de actuali intelligentia Dei). Divine revelation is morally necessary in order that, in the present state of mankind, God may be known to all, without difficulty, without extended research, with a firm certitude and even by those who are scarcely capable of following a rational argument, and finally without admixture of error. The same report then specifies that in speaking of the present condition of man, the text is to be understood as referring to man weighed down by sin.

Thus the Catholic Church admits officially that for sinful humanity, the radical power of knowing God scarcely ever actually exercises itself in a correct manner apart from a dependence upon Christian Revelation. This is no recent discovery. As Aquinas said, "Even as regards these truths about God which human reason can investigate, it was necessary that man be taught by a divine revelation. For the truth about God, such as reason can know it, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors." Saint Augustine, who maintains firmly that the true divinity cannot be totally hidden from a rational creature, and that no man may be allowed to ignore Him, has also written: "It is a great effort, and very rare too, to raise oneself by the mind above all corporeal and incorporeal creatures, whose mutability we have recognized, up to an immutable substance known as God and to learn from God that all that is not Himself has no other Author than He. The mind, naturally endowed with reason and intelligence, but affected with chronic imperfections, is incapable... of enduring this immutable light... it was necessary at first that it be imbued and purified by faith. In order that in faith man might advance towards Truth, with more assurance, Truth itself, God, the Son of God, made man without stripping himself of His Godliness, estab-
lished and founded this faith itself, in order that a Way might be opened for man by God-Man to God.”

The Fathers of the Church, medieval theologians, and others after them, were, of course, most receptive with regard to Greek philosophy. But it was never without a reserve, the extent of which varied from thinker to thinker. They did not intend to be enslaved by Greek thought; rather, they intended to make use of it. They borrowed concepts and rational processes in order to explain clearly the Christian conception of God, not a Greek conception, or any other. They resisted vigorously any pretension of limiting themselves to a purely philosophical knowledge of God. In their eyes, a refusal to accept the Revelation proposed by the Church not only sets a limitation on our knowledge of God, but also falsifies it. Saint Augustine, for example, recalling his Manichean years, judges the idea he then had made of God: “When I thought of You it was not as of something firm and solid. For my God was not yet you but the error and vain fantasy I held.” We see this line of thought again in the work of Maurice Blondel, whose criticism of Deism is based upon it: “Is not the metaphysician involved in some sort of idolatry when he pretends to have encapsulated in his thought the infinite object of his pursuit or when in his conceptions, precepts, systems and natural religion he imagines that he is going to lay his hand on the transcendental Being in order to conquer and master Him?”

It is not the principle of natural knowledge of God which is here condemned, but a natural theology which closes itself to Christian revelation. Let us pick up again the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who follows a path analogous to that of Saint Augustine: The positive unbeliever, he says, who, having heard the Christian message, rejects it and is responsible for this rejection, “does not have a true knowledge of God; and by false knowledge of God, man does not approach Him, but is severed from Him. Nor is it possible for one who has a false opinion of God to know Him in any way at all, because the object of his opinion is not God.”

The same Saint Thomas, who borrowed from Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists the reasoning process underlying a natural knowledge of God, also recognized that the judgment of St. Paul on idolatry condemned all pagan theology—not only la theologia civilis, that is to say, official cult, and la theologia fabulatis, the myths exploited by the poets, but also la theologia naturalis of the philosophers. Borrowing his notions from Varren, he understands by “Natural Theology” the divinization of the world or of certain of its elements. He recognizes at once the imperfections of the “Platonists,” which attribute a divine character both to demons and the souls of celestial beings.

One notices that long before Barth, Catholic theology professed certain ideas which are very important to him. While the Church admits
the possibility of a natural knowledge of God, it is far from judging as reliable all knowledge which presents itself as such. The Church teaches that man is a sinner, that the discovery of the true God is always in some sense a conversion, and that man risks lowering God to his own level and seeing no more than his own shadow enlarged or the ideal total of his own possibilities. Without always being as severe as Barth, the Church has reservations on the thought of Kant, Hegel and Schleiermacher. She recognizes that "liberal theology" blunted the Gospel message and often made it "respectable." She will also admit that the same phenomenon produced itself at times in Catholic circles when, in order to adapt Christianity either to a rationalist and middle-class society, or to a proletarian revolutionary society, greater emphasis was placed on ideologies than on the strength of the Gospel itself.

Although he does not ignore those points in which Catholic thought coincides with his own, Barth does not seem to have taken adequate notice of this coincidence. Had he done so, his condemnation of Catholic thought would be surrounded by more nuances, though not basically changed. For what he judges as illegitimate in the Church is not simply such and such an historical form of natural theology, or excessive use made of it at a particular time, but the very idea that a natural knowledge of the true God may be at all possible. The problem confronting us, therefore, is to determine whether it is possible from a Christian viewpoint to see the question of the possibility of a natural knowledge of God as lying at the very heart of the controversy which natural theology, considered as an historical phenomenon, occasions.

2. Natural knowledge of God as a transcendental condition for Faith

Our task differs notably from the one undertaken by numerous Catholic theologians and philosophers during the modernistic period. These thinkers were concerned with philosophically justifying a rational knowledge of God which had been called into question by many, including some believers, in the name of neo-Kantianism, or positivism, or agnosticism. We too shall make use of philosophical reflections, but from a different perspective. Barth, we have seen, rejects natural theology, not because it is rational, but only insofar as it is natural; he does not reject it in the name of a theory of knowledge, but in the name of biblical revelation and faith in Christ. Therefore, it is from this point of view that his thesis must be examined. Does it conform to biblical teaching? And does the denial of a possibility for a natural knowledge of God allow the possibility of a knowledge of God through faith still to hold good?

Let us begin with the second point. One recalls that the problem posed by Barth at the beginning of his study concerning the knowability of God is to determine what are the presuppositions and condi-
tions for knowledge of God such as it happens He is known in Christian faith. Catholic theology, we have already said, admits as he does that the knowledge of God presupposes the occurrence of divine grace, which is to say the free revelation of God through Jesus Christ, and the free action of the Holy Ghost in the believer. It specifies that this revelation, which takes place both from within and without, is absolutely necessary for the knowledge of the mysteries which the coming of Christ alone reveals; it further specifies that this revelation is morally necessary in order that, in the present state of mankind, the certain and unvarnished knowledge of the true God may be accessible to all. This is the way Catholic thought defines the conditions for the possibility of a Christian knowledge of God, insofar as it exists as a true event. But conditions have not yet been determined for the possibility of the knowledge of God insofar as this is simply knowledge—i.e., insofar as it presents itself for a subject as meaning and truth. Although Barth makes a suggestive analysis of the conditions under which faith in the God who reveals Himself takes place as an actual event, we are forced to wonder if he instructs us so well in what concerns the transcendental condition for this knowledge without which we should have no way of knowing whether or not it is true. Would not this transcendental condition be the natural knowledge of God?

In tackling this problem from a transcendental angle we are bracketing all questions of fact. We do not make any claim to deal with the question of determining to what degree Plato or Aristotle, Sankara or Ramanuja, Zoroaster or Mohammed, has actually known “the true God.” Neither are we concerned with discovering whether or not the Christian can see a bare trace of “the true God” in the cult of fetishes, the belief in mana, or in the revolutionary myth. The execution of such a task would involve many distinctions; first, it would depend upon a precise analysis of each philosophy or religion, and upon an accurate theological conception of the extent of divine grace in the world of the “infidels.” This question implies a resolution of the more fundamental question: does a Christian viewpoint leave room for a natural knowledge of God at all? Of course, the whole matter would be settled if we denied this possibility at the very outset. For our part, we are not making any judgments concerning the question of knowing whether, in the process by which a man actually becomes a Christian, a natural knowledge of God does in fact chronologically precede, or at least ought to precede, the knowledge of God that comes from faith; rather we are concerned with exigencies of the intelligible order. It is our position that the knowledge of God which comes from faith presupposes a rational moment of natural knowledge. It is not necessary that the believer have explicated this rational moment; in other words, it is not necessary that the believer have formulated for himself a proof for the existence of God; neither is it necessary that he have evolved the

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rational implications of his experience; it is simply necessary that the possibility for doing so be present.

Barth, as we have seen, observes very correctly that God does not reveal himself in a direct and immediate manner, but through created signs, through His special works: the history of Israel and the human reality of Jesus Christ. It is impossible to avoid the question that poses itself immediately for consideration: how could the Prophets and Apostles—or how can we from our standpoint—recognize God’s revelation in these “special works”? Surely, the history of Israel, the human reality of Jesus Christ, the Bible which speaks of Him, have their own originality which even a layman’s glance is sufficient to discern. But this originality appears in the midst of our world; these realities thrust themselves into our world and are homogeneous with it. How could we see therein God’s action, if we did not carry, in the core of our spiritual activity, the power of knowing God, if the Absolute which we know by the natural power of our intellect had no affinity at all with the God of Whom the Bible speaks? It is not enough to appeal to a miracle of revelation or grace, which takes hold of our intellect and subdues it. Immediately the question rebounds: how can we know that our faith is the result of a miracle, that is to say of God’s action, and that it is not simply an arbitrary human act? Apart from a natural knowledge of God (as implicit as it may be), we should have no judicatory principle which would permit us to establish in truth the recognition of divine revelation in history; nothing would authorize us to affirm that the God of the Bible is really our God.

What prevents Barth from admitting the role of this natural knowledge is that at least to some extent he sees in it something which is subject to debate. Natural theology, he says, “affirms, besides the knowability of God in his revelation, a second knowability, found elsewhere.” Revelation and reason would then be juxtaposed as two complementary sources placed on the same level, the second making up for the insufficiency of the first. Consequently he sees in it a slighting of divine revelation and a negation of Christ’s exclusive sovereignty. The case is analogous to that of the relationship between Scripture and tradition, where Barth believes that the Catholic Church places side by side a human source and a unique divine source, when in reality, for the Catholic Church, Scripture and tradition are two witnesses established by the same Revelation; the Catholic Church refers both of them to the same source, which is the Gospel of Christ. Here, too, when we say that the knowledge obtained through faith implies a double possibility (firstly, that which appertains to revelation and grace, and secondly, that which is proper to reason), we do not place them on the same plane, and we do not assert that the second makes up for an insufficiency in the first. One refers to the actual occurrence of revelation, the other to the transcendental condition for it. The former conditions
faith inasmuch as it is an event, the latter inasmuch as it is a meaning.  

To affirm that faith depends on the rational autonomy of the subject is not affirm it as independent of divine action. The natural power of knowing God comes to man from the fact that God creates him unto His own image. The exercise of this power expresses immediately that God Himself has taken our intelligence into His power. Therefore, it is necessary to say with Barth, who in this respect is repeating the teaching of the Fathers, it is only through God that God can be known. However, we should insist that the foregoing statement should be qualified by an insistence on the fact that it is we who know God. "All knowledge being an immanent operation, the proximate conditions which determine for the subject either the subjective or objective validity of his knowledge must be found in the subject himself; those conditions which would be totally extrinsic to the subject would, insofar as the subject's knowledge is concerned, be non-existent. An object is known according to the mode and the measure of its presence in a subject."  

If God does not appear as the necessary condition of our existence and knowledge itself, revelation or grace can have no meaning for us. The condition of coming to know God in faith does not take place as such; rather it presupposes a natural capacity for knowing God.

As we see it, what we defend under the title of natural knowledge of God is not one or another of the historical forms of natural theology, but a principle: the transcendental condition for Christian faith itself. This principle is neither discovered in the course of descriptive analysis nor isolated by a process of abstraction or substraction, but discovered through a reflexive process.

Maréchal once remarked that, in Saint Thomas, "natural" knowledge of the first principles underlying all knowledge is a "natural activity, necessary and preconscious, [which comes into play] only upon the receipt of extrinsic data." Cognitio naturalis "in metaphysical terms is the equivalent of Kant's a priori knowledge." Transposing this conception (with reservations presented by different problems), we understand by natural knowledge of God, a knowledge a priori, not thetic, which comes into play when presented with the data of the Bible; and without this sort of knowledge it would be impossible to know the Bible as God's revelation.

Evidently such an application has its limitations. The external data on which the a priori works does not belong to universal experience, such as it does with the data upon which the exact sciences operate. It deals with a singular, contingent and historical fact. But with regard to the contingent as such, the transcendental is not a determinant. Knowledge neither of the Incarnation nor of the Trinity is included in a determinate manner in the a priori of the natural knowledge of God. Consequently, the human moment of faith is not reduced to the
transcendental; it implies a spiritual conversion. Nevertheless, an a priori is at work at the very core of the Christian knowledge of God, and such an a priori conditions the possibility of this knowledge in the sense that we have indicated.

Would this a priori exercise itself independently of Christians and biblical faith? We will see that the New Testament invites such an interpretation. According to the Epistle to the Romans, idolatry presupposes some knowledge of God. In the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Paul recognized, in some of the discourses of pagan poets, a rough outline of the knowledge of the true God. If this is the case, it would appear difficult to claim that Holy Scripture condemns purely and simply all ideas of God conceived by man independently of Scripture. The Bible does not always see idols in other conceptions of God; even in idolatry it discerns the presence of an original intuition of God. Therefore, it is well to distinguish between the formal non-thetical idea, and the historical concepts of the divinity. Present in all men, the first belongs to the constituent elements of his very reason; it is man himself insofar as God has created him in His own image. It is from this that historical concepts spring, even when they distort it and even though they express it inadequately. It is this same element that permits man eventually to recognize his error and to convert to the true God or at least to have a purer image of Him.

To the extent that the concept which is made of God is understood as relative to the God who transcends it and who manifests Himself by it, the inadequacy of this concept is surpassed. Therefore, it seems impossible to maintain that every idea of God conceived by man (and particularly by philosophers) would be a simple projection of the human essence to an infinite and absolute level. If one were to accede to Feuerbach's viewpoint, on what grounds would one possibly make an exception for the God of the Bible? If the God who reveals Himself is completely different from the God of our reason, then how could one escape the charge that our faith in Him is arbitrary?

In short, although we recognize that Barth's criticism is often valid with regard to natural theology as an historical phenomenon, we can not follow him in his condemnation of all natural knowledge of God: to follow Barth all the way would be to risk compromising the truth of Christian faith itself. The considerations which we have just developed more or less reflect the annotations which various theologians added in editing the first schema in preparing the work of the First Vatican Council. In the memorandum presented on November 21, 1837, to the Bishop of Strasbourg, defending his own position, Bautain wrote: "When it is asserted that, by rational arguments alone, man can demonstrate the existence and infinite perfection of God, does this not amount to an affirmation that man can raise himself to the level of God by his own power and that he can in effect know God without God?... Would
this not then mean that one is affirming that man does not need grace in order to believe in God and that we ourselves are the authors of our own faith?” In citing this text, in which Barth’s thesis can be recognized, we hasten to point out that the doctrine which it expounds would destroy the very foundations of faith. For our part, we should go along with St. Augustine in affirming that it would be impossible for us to believe, were it not for our rational souls. The doctrine cited in the foregoing text would also lead to skepticism of the sort expressed in the following passage by Lammenais: “When truth is given, man receives it; and this is his only function with respect to truth; still we might add, man ought to receive the truth confidently and not demand that it validate itself, for the simple reason that man is in no state to verify whatever claims are made for the validation of truth.” (Pensées diverses, p. 488)

Let us move on to the definition promulgated at Vatican I: Barth, who finds in this definition the antithesis of his own doctrine, discusses it in detail. Let us consider, however, whether or not his criticism rests upon an accurate understanding of the text.

At the beginning of the second chapter of the Constitution de fide catholica or Deo Filius, entitled De Revelatione, we read: Eadem sancta mater Ecclesia tenet et docet, rerum omnimun principium et finem naturali humanae rationis lumine et rebus creatis certo cognosci posse. (The same Holy Mother, the Church, holds and teaches that God, Who is the beginning and end of all things, can be surely known from created things through the natural light of human reason.) The corresponding canon states: Si quis dixerit, Deum unum et verum, Creatorem et Dominum nostrum, per ea quae facta sunt, naturali rationis humanae lumine certa cognosci non posse, anathema sit. (Let anyone be anathema who would say that our Lord, the one and true God, may not be surely known by means of created things by the natural light of human reason.)

If one wishes to understand the precise meaning of these succinct but carefully considered formulas he must refer to the Acts of the Council where all the important words are explained. One learns there at once that the definition wishes to ward off two errors simultaneously: on the one hand, traditionalism (at that time very much alive), according to which it is impossible to arrive at a definite knowledge of God without the positive instruction received from revelation and transmitted by tradition; on the other hand, all philosophical doctrine (offshoots of the Encyclopedists and Kantianism) according to which the existence of God cannot be proven by sound argument and, consequently, cannot be known with any certitude by reason. Having decided that these theses destroy the very basis of faith, the Council asserts that human reason has the power of knowing God with certainty when it uses creatures as the point of departure for its proof.
Although the Council is concerned with an active potency (*poten·tian activam*) and not a purely passive one, its definition is limited to the affirmation of the existence of the potency as such. It does not pronounce on the historical realization of a natural knowledge of God, but simply on its *possibility* (*Deum cognoscī posse*). All questions concerning whether or not this possibility has ever been actualized have been carefully set aside. One of the reporters, of course, Msgr. Gasser, claims that Plato and Aristotle knew the true God.70 The interpretation which he gives to their thought raises reservations. But he is speaking in his own name, in order to reply to an objection and not to define exactly the meaning of the formula proposed for Council approval.71 An annotation of the preparatory schema says that what is at stake here is not a question of fact. It is not a question of knowing whether men, considered individually, derive their first knowledge of God from His manifestations in creatures, or if instead they learn of His existence through revealed doctrine which is presented to them; what is affirmed is that human reason has the power of knowing God with the phenomena of nature as its point of departure.72 In the course of its discussion, the Council was led to specify that it was speaking of man in general and not taking original sin fully into account; therefore, it did not wish to declare that it is impossible to meet an adult human who is invincibly ignorant of God. In order that there should not be any ambiguity in this regard, the first draft was revised and many amendments were rejected.73 “We are speaking,” says Msgr. Gasser, “simply of rational principles, and we affirm that God can be known with certitude by means of rational principles, however that exercise of reason may be.”74 And the Council will add to its definition the monition which we mentioned above: In the present state of mankind, revelation is morally necessary in order that all may come fully to a certain knowledge of God.75

Barth has well noted that the formulation of the definition was “circumspect” and that it affirmed only the possibility of a natural knowledge of God. He rejects it, however, because he feels that we have no other possible means of knowing God than that which is present in revelation. His essential criticism is not primarily directed at the idea that God would be knowable to reason, with reason using the world as point of departure. This idea, he says, considered in itself and taking into account its circumspect expression, could be interpreted *in meli·orem partem* and could thus be accepted by way of a strict interpretation. But what can be neither accepted nor tolerated in Roman Catholic theology is the overall way in which it has posed the problem. It is an unacceptable problematic, of which the thesis under consideration is but the necessary conclusion. According to Barth, the trouble with the Council's handling of the question is that on the one hand, it effects
a split in our idea of God, and on the other, it makes an abstraction of divine work.\textsuperscript{76}

Vatican I doubtless does not intend to speak of a God other than the Christian God; it does not wish to address itself to only part of God. But in what concerns His knowability, it causes a provisional division, which effects a division in our understanding of God Himself. It designates God finally as \textit{Dominus noster}, but more decisively as \textit{rerum omnium principium et finis}, as \textit{Creator}; and it is under this aspect alone that it declares Him accessible to a natural knowledge. Barth agrees that God is assuredly the beginning and the end of all things; He is the Creator; but He is also the Reconciler and the Redeemer. This unity must be taken seriously. We cannot conceive of God's Lordship, if we forget that it is the Lordship of the Holy in the world of sinners. We cannot conceive what the Creator is, if we forget that He is also the One who raises the dead. Who authorizes this splitting of the idea of God, in order to make an abstract philosophical question of the knowability of the Creator? Even when the Bible speaks of the Lord and Creator, it speaks of the One God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of the Yahweh of Jewish history who pardons sins and saves His people, and therefore of God the Reconciler and Redeemer no less than of God the Lord and Creator; it speaks of the One who has revealed His triune being in Jesus Christ. The division effected by the Roman Catholic doctrine cannot be authorized by the Word of God; it is the fruit of human speculation. It presupposes already what it wishes to affirm: that man can know God and know Him in effect without Revelation. In the Church founded on the Divine Word, the Unity of God must be taken seriously even when we are dealing with His knowability.\textsuperscript{77}

We can reply to Barth's criticism by stating that if it were forbidden to introduce in theology the procedures of human thought, and in particular methodological abstraction, there would remain nothing more for us to do than to read Scripture and be silent. If it be illegitimate to envisage successively different aspects of God and of His Action, why does Barth himself treat God successively as Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer? Surely, when he envisages each of them, he keeps all the rest before his mind and refers to them constantly, and it is quite proper that he do this. But the fact of focusing his attention on one relation already constitutes a methodological abstraction, perfectly legitimate as long as the mind does not remain fixed on it and so long as the mind continues to move on to other relations. Barth thinks that God is known in the totality of His being or that He is not known at all.\textsuperscript{78} But if this is the case, then the believers of the Old Testament did not know God at all, since they knew neither Jesus Christ expressly, nor the Trinity; for quite a long period of time they were unaware of the resurrection from the dead and of many other things. They knew that God was their
Savior, and this fact contains the rest implicitly. But, would it be necessary to say that they did not have an explicit knowledge of God the Creator, on the grounds that they did not hold expressly to the dogma of the Trinity? With respect to God, surely, Revelation is one and unique; with respect to man, it is spread across history. Even when completed, its different aspects cannot be envisaged successively. Knowledge of God is never wholly adequate, not solely because it is revealed exclusively through signs, but because the human word, which expresses it according to the law of temporal succession, cannot be identified with the Word of God itself.

Therefore, it is not to divide the idea of God that one names Him Creator and Lord without adding immediately that He is also the Reconciler and Redeemer. The God of Whom Vatican I affirms that we can have a natural knowledge is the true God, the God of Israel, who revealed Himself through Jesus Christ, the One who is at once Creator and Redeemer. Nevertheless, the Council, speaking here of the natural knowledge of God, could not call Him Redeemer in this context without creating a serious ambiguity: if the distinction between God the Creator and God the Redeemer were not maintained, the obvious meaning of the Canon would then be that man could, with the created world as his point of departure and by the natural light of reason alone, know the historic Redemption by Christ—and this would be both absurd and contrary to Christian doctrine. But if we go back to the text of the chapter, where this ambiguity is cleared up by the use of philosophical analysis, we see that God is designated, implicitly, not only Creator, but also as the Initiator of our salvation (whatever would be the historical determination of this salvation) *Deum rerum omnium principium et finem* . . . to name God at the same time as the beginning and end of man is to imply that He is not only the source of his being, but also the source of man's salvation. In effect, is it not evident that God does not cease to be our beginning at the moment in which He becomes our end and that He is, inevitably and by all suppositions, the beginning of the act itself by which we reach Him as our end? Thus the unity of God and the unity of His Word with regard to man are safely kept together.

Nevertheless, the principal element of Barth's criticism does not lie here. What he finds fault with in the First Vatican Council, and for that matter in Catholic doctrine in general, is that it sets aside the Work of God in favor of a "being" of God in general, a "being" which would be shared with us and all other existing things. The God whose knowability we are trying to expound, Barth says, is the One who is engaged in a work and an action with regard to man; it is the God of Israel, Who is also the Father of Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, and the Holy Spirit. The Roman Catholic doctrine believes itself obliged to come to the consideration of the being of God in His Work only after
It has dealt with the question of the being of God in general and *in abstracto*. It believes it can also know about God’s “being” without revelation, insofar as He is the beginning and end of things and also insofar as He is the Creator. We have a convenient situation: by virtue of the *analogia entis*, God and man are comprehended under the same idea of being, while participating in “being” in a different manner; therefore, one can see them together on a common or neutral ground. It is not surprising, continues Barth, but on the contrary, it is perfectly valid to say that God, thus conceived as a Being *in abstracto*, can be known without revelation. But when we do this, he says, we are no longer dealing with the God of the Church; rather we are in the presence of an idol. What is really inadmissible in Roman Catholic doctrine as far as Barth is concerned is that it “likens” the Lord of the Church to this “idol”; Barth claims that the Catholic idea of God “is a construct which obviously derives from an attempt to unite Yahweh with Baal, the triune God of Holy Scripture with the concept of being of Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy.” The thesis of the knowability of God by reason, with creatures as the point of departure for reason’s ability to know God, is a pagan conception in which Barth sees no possibility of acknowledging the Christian idea of God.

One would have to agree with Barth, if such were the Catholic doctrine. But we scarcely recognize it in this interpretation. We should also offer an explanation of our position concerning the notion of *analogia entis*, since Barth returns to it at length in his discussion of the limits of the knowledge of God, but here let us limit ourselves to the following question: Is it true that Catholic doctrine, as defined at Vatican I, makes an abstraction of God’s work in favor of His “being in general” and *in abstracto*, and makes him similar to a pagan idea of God, to an idol? Let us first note that Catholic doctrine does make an abstraction of all divine action, since it affirms the creative act and professes that, if we are able to know God by the light of pure reason, it is because He gives us at each moment an illumination while creating us in His own image. But does such an affirmation also make an abstraction of God’s action in the history of salvation and of what He is in this action: God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ, Holy Ghost? In one sense, yes; for Catholic doctrine does not pretend that we can have a natural knowledge from what is revealed in historical revelation alone. One can say then, if need be, that it refers in this connection to the being of God in general and *in abstracto*. Nevertheless, the expression “abstraction” is misleading, especially in the context in which Barth brings it up. The natural knowledge of God, such as Catholic teaching has it, does not have as its object a pagan component of a hybrid concept that amalgamates the Christian notion of the Divine Being with a pagan notion of “being.” Catholic doctrine addresses itself to the true God, the God of Israel, and of Jesus Christ. Let us ask, what is it that
the First Vatican Council, and for that matter the overall Catholic tradition and much of the Protestant tradition, are trying to get in this matter of natural theology? We are here dealing with a question on which ways of thinking may differ and on which no view can be correct which fails to see that a number of nuances are at work. In any case, it is a secondary question as compared with the essential concern at this point: The affirmation that faith in the God of the Bible is not an arbitrary act, that when we profess that "God revealed Himself through Jesus Christ" the word "God" has a meaning for us and that at the moment we are certain of the reality of this God; this certitude is based upon respect for our human knowledge and is in accordance with the demands of our reason.

As we have seen, if Vatican I judges it necessary to define the possibility of a natural knowledge of God, it is because this possibility constitutes the foundation of Christian faith. To be sure, the objective basis for the possibility of faith resides in divine revelation. But the subjective basis of this possibility resides necessarily in us; otherwise it would not be our certitude. The possibility of natural knowledge of God is the transcendental condition for the knowledge of faith. But, in strict terms, to identify a transcendental state is not to practice abstraction; rather it is to make a reflection. When Catholic teaching affirms the possibility of a natural knowledge of God as the beginning and end of all things, it does not really make an abstraction of God's action, at the expense of His being in general and in abstracto. It separates, by an act of reflection, the radical condition that certain knowledge of this God is possible to us. It does not claim, as Barth seems to believe, that natural knowledge must necessarily temporally precede knowledge of faith; rather it maintains that natural knowledge of God is necessarily implied by virtue of man's status as a rational being. By identifying this state and drawing our attention to it, Catholic doctrine is not creating an idol which it then identifies with the God of the Church; on the contrary, it makes explicit the internal condition by means of which one can find this "God" of the idols and acknowledge Him without lowering Him to the level of an idol.

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2 Church Dogmatics (henceforth C.D.), 1, 2, 791.
3 This refers to the three articles of the Creed: I believe in God the Father... in Jesus Christ... and in the Holy Ghost.
4 Karl Barth: Dogmatics in Outline (Translated by G. T. Thomson), Philosophical Library, New York, 1949, p. 66.
5 B. Pascal, Pensées (Translated by F. Trotter), Random House, New York, 1941, p. 174 (No. 547).
6 C.D. I, 2, 790-791; also C.D. II, 2, 539-40.
7 C.D. I, 1, 1.
8 C.D. I, 2, 791.
9 C.D. I, 1; also VIII, 130-135, 166.
10 C.D. III, 4; also VIII.
11 C.D. III, 4; also I, 1, and VIII.
12 C.D. I, 2, 822-825.
13 C.D. I, 2, 926-927.
14 C.D. I, 2, 823.
15 Ibid.
16 C.D. III, 3, V; IV, I, 768.
19 C.D. II, I, 85.
22 C.D. II, I, 164-165.
23 C.D. II, I, 79-84.
27 C.D. II, I, 126.
28 C.D. II, I, 165.
29 C.D. II, I, 135.
30 C.D. II, I, 85-86.
32 C.D. II, I, 186-141.
33 C.D. II, I, 141-142, 165.
34 C.D. II, I, 165.
35 Q.D. II, I.
36 C.D. II, I, 166.
38 C.D. II, I, 168.
41 C.D. II, I, 86.
42 C.D. II, I, 357.
43 C.D. II, I, 70, 269.
44 C.D. II, I, 270.
46 Pr. Th., 434-439, 513.
48 Constitutione de fide catholica, cap. II, Denz, 1786.
50 Ibid., Col. 136d. A translation of this report and a commentary upon it with an explication of the text can be found in J.M.A. Vacant, Etudes theologique sur les Constitutions du Concile du Vatican d'apres les Actes de ce Concile. La Constitution Dei Filius, I, Paris 1895, p. 344 sqq.
51 Sum. theol., I., q. I, a. I. Cf. Contra Gentiles, I., 4; De Veritate, q. 14, a. II. A remarkable historical commentary on these texts has been given by P. P. Synave, "La
In Bultmann's language it could be said that the first sort of knowledge belongs to the ontic and existential order, whereas the second belongs to the ontological or existential order.


Collectio Lacensis, VII, col. 520d-521a.

C.D. II, I, 79-84.

Denz. 1785.

This commentary may be found in Vacant, *Etudes théologiques . . . La Constitution Dei Filius*, I, 283-311.


Collectio Lacensis, VII, col. 236b-288b.

See Vacant, pp. 304-306. The objection alluded to by Monsignor Gasser was the following: a potency is absolutely non-existent if it is never actualized; now the so-called potency for knowing God with certitude by the natural light of reason is a potency which has never been actualized since the great philosophers of antiquity never succeeded in knowing with certitude that God is the beginning and end of all things; therefore the potency in question is non-existent. The objection is not negligible. A potency which never passed over into act would be, if not non-existent, at least unknown by us. We should not be able to affirm the possibility of a sure natural knowledge of God if such a possibility were never truly presented to us as actualized. But even if none of the philosophers of antiquity actualized this possibility, it does not follow that this possibility has never been actualized. Evidence that such a possibility is actualized in the Christian world is given in the fact that many philosophies have come forth within the inner sphere of Christianity. The natural knowledge of God is implied by the knowledge of God that comes from faith; this natural knowledge of God, though not always thematized, can be discovered by reflection.

Collectio Lacensis, VII, col. 520c.

See Vacant, p. 289-291.

Collectio Lacensis, VII, col. 238b.

Denz. 1786.

C.D. II, I, 84.

Ibid., I, 79-80.

Ibid., I, 51-52.

Ibid., I, 81-82, 84. Quote from p. 84.