

NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: REFLECTIONS ON ROMANS 1:18-32

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THE QUESTION to which this paper is devoted, namely, the possibility of a natural knowledge of God apart from faith, is one that might be thought to be closed for Catholic theologians. The dogma of Vatican I does not appear to allow of any compromise: "The same holy mother Church holds and teaches that God, principle and end of all things, can be known for certain by the natural light of human reason from created things; 'for His invisible qualities, since the creation of the world, have been seen as discerned through the things that have been made' (Rom 1:20)" (DS 3004). Nor does a quick reference to the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans give any encouragement to a reopening of the question. Moreover, Catholic exegetical tradition seems to be quite firmly against it. Vatican I, a little later in the dogmatic constitution quoted above, interprets Rom 1:20 as speaking of a purely natural knowledge of God, thus reflecting the common exegesis of its time.¹ Nor does the position seem to have changed. The most recent Catholic commentary in English has this to say: "There is no question here either of knowledge through a positive revelation or knowledge by faith."² Yet in real life it is only those who already believe in God by faith who claim that He can be known by reason. The aim of this paper is to re-examine Rom 1 and thus attempt a reformulation of the relation of faith and reason in regard to the existence and nature of God. It is hoped that this reformulation will be seen as a valid development of the doctrine of Vatican I.

At the outset it must be remembered that in Rom 2:13-15 Paul says that some of the Gentiles obey the law that is "written on their hearts." Natural knowledge of God, then, will come from two directions: from without, i.e., from the contemplation of the universe, and from within, i.e., as a moral imperative. The one demands the other. Although this paper is concerned mainly with the knowability of God from the contemplation of the universe, due account will be taken of the role of conscience and moral decision.

¹ The relevant passage, from DS 3015, is: "Quocirca Apostolus, qui a gentibus Deum 'per ea, quae facta sunt' [Rom 1, 20], cognitum esse testatur, disserens tamen de gratia et veritate, quae 'per Jesum Christum facta est' [cf. Io 1, 17], pronuntiat: '*Loquimur Dei sapientiam in mysterio...*'"

² J. A. Fitzmyer, in the commentary on Romans, *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969) 2, 296.

EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 1

We commence with an exegesis of the Rom 1 pericope to the extent that it is concerned with our question.

The "men" of whom Paul speaks here are his pagan contemporaries of the Greco-Roman world, the "Greeks" of 1:16. This world lies in full decadence before his eyes. In his judgment, its unlicensed immorality is itself the punishment of God. In their wickedness these men suppress the truth of God. This truth is no longer present to their minds, held down as it is by the evil of their lives. As a reproach to this stands the universe, which speaks so eloquently of God, its Creator. In v. 19b occurs the first departure in this passage from the present tense. The truth about God is plain to see, because God Himself revealed it. The use of the aorist *ephanerōsen* (revealed) indicates here that a particular action in the past is being referred to.³ The phrase "ever since the creation of the world" shows that this action is the creation of the world by God. By this He revealed His truth to them. This does not mean that man reaches out to and grasps God. The text says that God takes the initiative. The creation, remaining in existence, is His constant reproach to the godlessness of their lives.

Since the creation of the world "the invisible things of God" have been accessible to the human mind as it contemplates the visible universe. Paul states three of them: God's eternity, to be known from the permanence of the universe; His omnipotence, to be known from its greatness; and His deity, or transcendence, to be known from the fact that He was the Creator and therefore other than all that He has made. Their sin, continuing in the face of all this, is inexcusable.

In v. 21 Paul begins to speak of the Gentiles in the aorist, which for our purposes here means "past," tense. This is a fact of the greatest significance for the interpretation of the pericope. It begins in the present, changes to the past, and returns to the present at the end. This means that the middle section is not about the current situation in the Hellenistic world but about a past situation. This could not have involved Paul's contemporaries, and so must have involved their ancestors. In v. 21 Paul is saying that the Gentiles of old knew God.⁴ This is perfectly compatible with his earlier statement that the present Gentiles do not know Him, having suppressed this knowledge. Nowhere else does Scripture make the assertion that the Gentiles knew

³ While of itself the aorist simply denotes punctiliar action without reference to tense, this statement is justified by the indicative mood and the context of the verb in question. Cf. M. Zerwick, S.J., *Graecitas biblica* (Rome, 1960) pp. 74-86.

⁴ Cf. A. Feuillet, P.S.S., "La connaissance naturelle de Dieu par les hommes d'après Romains 1, 18-23," *Lumière et vie* 14 (1954) 74-76.

God. All the passages that one might cite are, like the dogma of Vatican I, content simply to affirm the *power* of the human mind to know God. The fact that Paul says that they actually knew Him is confirmation of the fact that here he is not making a statement about human nature and its powers, but has in mind a particular historical occasion in the past when the Gentiles actually knew God.

The possibility of knowing God from the works of creation is actually a commonplace of Late Judaism. The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Fourth Book of Esdras could be quoted to show this.⁵ But more importantly, chapters 13 and 14 of the Book of Wisdom are so close to the thought of Paul "as to make it clear that at some point of his life St. Paul must have bestowed on the Book of Wisdom a considerable amount of study."⁶ In supporting the possibility of knowing God from creation, Paul would only be reaffirming the tradition to which he belongs, but in saying that the Gentiles actually knew Him, he is going well beyond it.

We are now ready for two observations. The first is that the assertion of the knowability of God from creation issues from a culture in which He is already known by faith. Latourelle points out that Judaism, always so insistent that God could be known from reason, did not itself first know Him that way. The God whom they knew was the God of the covenant. It was only later that they came to understand that the God who brought them out of the nothingness of slavery must have brought forth the whole world from nothingness.⁷ The second observation is that in Rom 1 Paul does not say that it was from reason *alone* that the Gentiles of old knew God. Yet Catholic commentators have consistently interpreted him as saying that this knowledge *was* from reason alone. One would be surprised at this, were it not for the fact that it is clearly an example of confessional exegesis: Catholic theological tradition has always laid great emphasis on natural theology. There is nothing in the text to support this claim; for while it does say that the truth about God is there to read in nature and that the Gentiles of old actually did know Him, it makes no direct statement about whether they were men of faith or not, and this, after all, is the central issue.

In v. 21 it becomes clear that the Gentiles are to blame because they knowingly refused God the worship that was His due and allowed themselves to become estranged from Him. They gave themselves up to sophistry (here Paul appears to be tilting at Greek philosophy) and

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 71.

⁶ W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (I.C.C.) p. 52.

⁷ R. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (New York, 1966) pp. 30-31.

exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images of men, birds, animals, or reptiles. It is certain that Paul is not referring to animal worship among his contemporaries. He is alluding to two Old Testament passages, viz., Ps 106:19–20 and Dt 4:15–18. These speak of the idolatry of the Jews in the desert. Paul, in describing the idolatry of the Gentiles, borrows the language that the Old Testament uses to describe the same sin committed by the Jews. There is no need to say, as Feuillet does,⁸ that Paul is going back to the time before the division of mankind into the two great groups, Jews and Gentiles, in order to be able to denounce the sins of the latter in thinking of those of the former. The fact of the matter is much simpler: biblical language came naturally to Paul. Faced with the task of recounting the sin of the Gentiles, he makes use of the words most present to his consciousness, viz., those used by the Bible to describe this same sin committed by the Jews.⁹

In the following verses Paul blames all the subsequent sins of the Gentiles on their primordial sin of idolatry. Here he is at one with the author of the Book of Wisdom: "The worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil" (Wis 14:27). In v. 24 there occurs the first of the three instances of *paredōken* in the pericope. God gave them up. Their punishment was to fall ever deeper into sin. Since their subsequent sins are seen as divine punishment, their culpability must be situated first and foremost in their primordial sin of idolatry. Coming to the end of the passage, we note that with v. 32 a return is made to the present tense. The present Gentiles, we are told, not only commit all these sins but approve others who commit them. Not even being prepared to recognize that what they do is sinful, they are clearly in a worse state than other sinners.

A consideration of the whole passage, Rom 1:16–3:24, throws some light on the reason for Paul's changes of tense in our pericope and, more importantly, on his reason for fastening the guilt of the Gentiles on to their sin of idolatry. In 1:16–17 he states the thesis of the Epistle: justification is by faith. In 1:18–3:20 he is concerned to show that the whole world is in sin before God and so in need of justification. In 3:21–24 he draws the conclusion: the justification before God of which all stand in need is given by God as a gift, received through faith in Jesus Christ. It is interesting to note the concrete way in which he goes about the middle section. His argument is not based on a priori

⁸ *Art. cit.*, p. 75.

⁹ Note also the suggestion of F. F. Bruce, in *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) p. 85, that Paul may here be alluding to Gn 1:20–26.

thinking on the nature of man, but on his observation of and theological reflection on the world around him. He has to show that all men are in sin and need justification. "All men" means "the Greeks and the Jews." Hence in 1:18-32 he is concerned to show that the Greeks are in sin, and in 2:1-3.20 that the Jews are in sin. He shows the latter by the fact that though the Jews have the law of Moses as their guide, they nevertheless break it constantly. In the case of the Gentiles his task is not so simple. Patently, they commit many sins, and of the worst kinds. But also, being Gentiles, they do not know the God against whom they are sinning. How, then, can their transgressions be imputed as real sins? In order to establish their real sinfulness, Paul postulates a time in the past when they *did* know God. They now worship strange gods. Hence, when they changed from the worship of the true God to that of strange gods, it was then that they sinned against the light. God punished them by giving them up to the many sins in which they now languish. It will be seen that Paul at one time distinguishes between past and present Gentiles, and at another time identifies them. In each case he does it to suit his argument. Obviously, the knowledge of God and the primordial sin cannot be attributed to the present Gentiles, and so are projected into the past. If Paul were to stop there, however, his case would fail, as the present Gentiles would stand acquitted on the grounds of ignorance. Hence, in order to put also the present Gentiles in the wrong, he regards them as "making only one with their distant ancestors,"¹⁰ so that they share their guilt. It must be noted, however, that the guilt of the Gentiles is global. Paul is speaking in general terms and does not intend to include every single man of the Gentiles. Otherwise he would be unable to say in Rom 2:13-15 that some of them are justified.

BARTH'S EXEGESIS

At this point it is useful to turn to the exegesis offered by Karl Barth in the early stages of the *Church Dogmatics*. At this relatively early period he still maintained an uncompromising hostility towards natural theology.

On its own, says Barth,¹¹ the Rom 1 pericope might give the impression that there was a valid natural theology, but in context it is clearly seen not to support such a contention. The Jews and the Greeks of the first three chapters of Romans are Jews and Greeks confronted with

¹⁰ Feuillet, *art. cit.*, p. 76: "ne faisant qu'un avec ses lointains ancêtres."

¹¹ This paragraph is a summary of the argument presented by Barth in *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*. In the English translation edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh), see Vol. 1/2 (1956) 306, and Vol. 2/1 (1957) 119-21.

Christ. It is in the light of Christ that it can be seen that the wrath of God is revealed among the Gentiles. This wrath is a condemnation not only of their worst deeds, which all would readily admit to be sins, but even of the best that they can do, viz., their worship of God, which, being the worship of idols, does not honor God but only serves to bring His judgment upon them all the more strongly. Preaching to the Gentiles, Paul claims that they too belong to God, and even that they know God; for His eternal power and divinity, known from the creation, belong also to Jesus Christ. Not that the Gentiles could be expected to know this. Hence the Christian judgment that they are in sin is as much a shock to them as the same judgment passed on the Jews is a shock to them. Thus the knowledge that the Gentiles have of God is imputed. Only when they come to have faith in Christ does it become subjective and conscious. Hence their knowledge of God is by no means derived from natural theology, but is the knowledge of faith.

In criticism of this view, we may say with Bouillard that one can understand the Protestant idea of imputed justice, even if one cannot accept it, but even the *idea* of an imputed knowledge is unacceptable, inasmuch as knowledge, to be such, must be present to a consciousness.¹² Barth's exegesis involves imposing on such words as "know" and "inexcusable" meanings that are at variance with the normal, accepted meanings of these words—a sure indication that the whole exegesis has set out from a false theological position. This would be the radical disjunction of God and man caused by original sin. In the Catholic doctrine, because it sees human nature as not intrinsically destroyed by this sin, there exists from the side of human nature a real point of contact between man and God. Not so in the theology of Barth. The following words of his are significant: "We can certainly call what Paul does a 'making contact.' But if we do, we must take into account that the 'point of contact' is not regarded as already present on man's side but as newly instituted in and with the proclamation of the Gospel."¹³ For Barth, revelation is a radical, even violent, intervention in man's world on the part of God and His grace. This finds human nature not only unprepared, as Catholic doctrine would have it, but quite unable to respond. Hence Barth's rejection of any suggestion that it is within the power of man's nature to attain a knowledge of the one, true God by the use of reason. In so explaining the text of Rom 1, Barth takes no account of the formidable Jewish tradition of the knowability of God from reason, to which, as we shall see, Paul was bearing witness in Rom 1. We

¹² H. Bouillard, *The Knowledge of God* (New York, 1968) p. 50.

¹³ *Church Dogmatics* 2/1, 121.

should be grateful, however, that Barth, by this piece of confessional exegesis, has provided the opposite extreme to what we might call the extreme Catholic interpretation, no less confessional, that has been outlined above. A more faithful interpretation of the text, we suggest, will be located somewhere between these extremes.

A MIDDLE POSITION

The very fact that Paul blames the present woes of the Gentiles on a primordial sin in the distant past is enough to invite a comparison with the account of the sin of Adam in Genesis. This has been done admirably by M. Hooker in her article "Adam in Romans 1."¹⁴ Feuillet, too, remarks that this is one of the three places in the first seven chapters of Romans in which we are asked to meditate on the first chapters of Genesis.¹⁵ The decisive point is that Rom 1:21 is the only place in Scripture that asserts an actual knowledge of God by the Gentiles. There are places both in Scripture and in other Jewish writings that assert that the Gentiles could know God, but never is this knowledge said to be actually achieved. Indeed, the Gentiles are uniformly presented in these writings, and even in the other writings of Paul touching this subject, e.g. 1 Th 4:5, 2 Th 1:8, Gal 4:8, and 1 Cor 1:21, precisely as those who do not know God. How, then, could Paul in one only case say that the Gentiles knew God, unless he believed that in that case they knew Him by revelation? The extensive literary links discovered by Hooker between Rom 1 and the Genesis account are nothing other than Paul's way of making a certain identification of the sin of the Gentiles with that of Adam. This implies that the knowledge they had of God was the same as Adam's, i.e., a knowledge from revelation, a knowledge of faith. This is why Paul can make the astounding and unique statement that the Gentiles actually knew God. Their subsequent ignorance of God, which is the situation to which the rest of the Bible bears witness, is the result of their "original" sin of turning away from Him and adoring idols.

Confirmatory of this is the solution of the problem raised by v. 32. A preliminary difficulty is the attribution of a certain knowledge of God to the present Gentiles, viz., that they know God's decree that those who commit sin deserve to die, after the statement of v. 18 that the knowledge of God has been lost among them. However, we have seen enough of Paul's argumentation to be able to recognize that he is here using a device to include the present Gentiles under sin. He is here considering all the Gentiles, past and present, as one, in order to

¹⁴ M. D. Hooker, "Adam in Romans 1," *New Testament Studies* 6 (1959-60) 297-306.

¹⁵ *Art. cit.*, p. 78.

be able to predicate the culpability of the past Gentiles of the present ones as well. The greater difficulty is: How could the past Gentiles have been expected to know that the penalty for sin was death? This is a question that exegetes have never been able to answer convincingly, even when they restricted it to the present Gentiles. When, however, we see the sin of the Gentiles related to that of Adam, the solution to the problem emerges. The Gentiles knew that the penalty for sin was death because they shared Adam's knowledge of this decree, announced to him by God in Gn 3:19.

It was remarked above that Paul makes a certain identification of the sin of the Gentiles with that of Adam. He did not make a complete identification, for he could not. It is abundantly clear from Rom 5 that for Paul *the* original sin was the personal sin of the single man Adam. Feuillet, too, has recognized the links between the sin of the Gentiles and that of Adam, but we must reject the grounds he gives for Paul's refusal to identify them completely, viz., that "the Apostle does not make paganism a defiguration of the primitive revelation, . . . but he sees there a perversion of a rational knowledge of God."¹⁶ Paul's real reason was other. In Rom 5 he relates the present sins of the Jews to the sin of Adam, in that he sees their sins as the direct consequence of his (vv. 12, 18, 19). The fact that he speaks of the aggravating effect of the Mosaic law (vv. 13, 20) shows that he is thinking primarily of the sins of the Jews. But, as O. Kuss has rightly remarked, "The verse of Rom 5:19a ["By one man's disobedience many were made sinners"] stands already behind the assertions of Rom 1:18-23 and Rom 2:1-3:20."¹⁷ In other words, Paul would like to apply his condemnation of the Jews also to the Gentiles. The sins of the Jews flowed from that of Adam, and the Mosaic law was brought in to remind them of the God against whom they were sinning, so that their sins remained always fully conscious and imputable (v. 13). It would suit Paul's purpose of showing that the Gentiles too are in sin to show that there was an unbroken line of conscious sin from Adam through the Gentiles of old to the present Gentiles, but this he cannot do; for there is no sin without knowledge of God, and this knowledge, given to Adam, preserved in Judaism, was precisely what was lost by the Gentiles when they lapsed into idolatry. He must therefore relate their present sins not directly to the sin of Adam but to their own original sin of idolatry, which, on the authority of Wis 14:27, he can see as the source of all their present sins in much the same way as in Rom 5 he sees the sin of Adam as

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁷ O. Kuss, *Auslegung und Verkündigung: Aufsätze zur Exegese des neuen Testaments* (Regensburg, 1963) p. 228.

the source of the sins of the Jews. It seems that Paul, for whom in the last analysis there is only one original sin (that of Adam: cf. Rom 5:12) and not two, unable to identify completely the sin of the Gentiles with that of Adam, nevertheless sees them confusedly as one for the sake of the symmetry of his argument. Developing this argument further, he sees in Rom 1:19-20 the universe as performing for the Gentiles the same function as the law performed for the Jews. As we saw in Rom 5, the Mosaic law had the effect of keeping the sins of the Jews conscious and imputable, and in that sense made them worse, for it was for them a permanent and inescapable reminder of the God against whom they were sinning. The Gentiles did not have this law, but they at least had the universe, which never ceased to speak of God its Creator. "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims His handiwork" (Ps 19:1). For the Gentiles the universe was no less permanent and inescapable a reminder of the God against whom they were sinning by idolatry and the sins that flowed therefrom than the Mosaic law was for the Jews.

We are now in a better position to draw some conclusions about Paul's natural theology. He shared the natural theology of his Jewish background, which asserted the knowability of God from reason and the blameworthiness of those who failed thus to know Him. This natural theology said nothing about proving the existence of God from reason; it merely said that God could be known by means of what He had made. The quotation from Ps 19 given above illustrates this exactly. It was so unself-conscious that it failed to take into account the fact that it was already determined by faith. It rightly asserted that the God who addressed the Jews first in the covenant continued to speak to them in the creation. But if He spoke to them in the creation, then He spoke to the Gentiles too in that way, for like themselves they too were men, endowed with intelligence. Yet the Gentiles always remain the ones who in fact do not know God. With this natural theology Paul agrees completely. He does not go beyond it in Rom 1. There, where he said that the Gentiles knew God, he was speaking of the distant past, when they knew Him as Adam did, before they committed the sin that led them into their present condition of ignorance. He does not say there that they ever knew Him from reason alone, but rather that when they knew Him by faith they knew Him by reason too, from His creation, and when by idolatry they lost their faith this creation remained as a permanent witness to the God against whom they sinned and were sinning.

This exegesis will be seen to stand midway between the Barthian and the extreme Catholic one; for it denies that knowledge of God from

reason alone was achieved by the Gentiles, but affirms the possibility of knowing God from reason and integrates the achieved knowledge from reason into the knowledge by faith. It now remains to make some theological observations on the basis of this exegesis.

THEOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

What we have cited of the dogma of Vatican I simply affirms the possibility of a natural knowledge of God. Implicit in this is an affirmation of analogy and causality, but only because these are natural processes of the human mind. The Council did not commit itself to any position on matters of philosophy. It did not say, e.g., that the existence of God can be proved by philosophy, or that any of the current proofs for the existence of God is valid. It did nothing more than was done in the Old Testament, in Paul, and in rabbinic writing, i.e., it affirmed that God could be known from His creation. Admittedly, it made this assertion in the face of the fideism and agnosticism of its time. Where these denied that there was any valid natural knowledge of God, the Council affirmed that there was, but because it failed to integrate natural knowledge with faith, it did not do justice to the relation of faith and reason, even though it addressed itself to this problem in chapter 4 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Catholic Faith (*DS* 3015–20).

It will be recalled that the Council presented its dogma in three parts. So far we have given attention only to the first part of this. In the second part (*DS* 3005) the Council affirms the moral necessity for revelation of even “those matters concerning God that in themselves are not inaccessible to the human mind” if “in the present state of mankind” they are to “be known by all easily, with strong certitude, and with no admixture of error.” It then continues (also *DS* 3005) to affirm that “because God in His infinite goodness ordered man to a supernatural end,” “revelation must be said to be absolutely necessary.” In this third part, then, in regard to truths about God and man that cannot be known naturally, there is asserted an absolute necessity for revelation if they are to be known at all.

In his famous attack on the conciliar doctrine, Karl Barth maintained that, in distinguishing between God as Lord and Creator (God as known by reason) and God as Redeemer and Reconciler (God as known by revelation), the Catholic Church opposes itself to the unity of God.¹⁸ This accusation cannot be maintained against the thesis of this paper, which sees natural knowledge of God as always integrated into the knowledge of faith; for there “the eternal power and divinity” known from the universe are apprehended precisely as belonging to the one

¹⁸ *Church Dogmatics* 2/1, 79–80.

God known by faith. It is the same God who appeared in Jesus Christ who reveals Himself also in the universe. There is no question here of man's projecting an idol. But the question that must be asked is: Can this accusation be sustained against the system underlying the usual Catholic exegesis of Rom 1:19-21, in which the existence of a natural knowledge of God quite apart from faith is asserted?

In attempting to answer this question, it must be pointed out that St. Thomas, at any rate, did not attempt to show that there existed a natural knowledge of God independent of faith. In the *Summa theologiae* he set out to prove by philosophy the existence of the God in whom he already believed by faith. When at the end of each of his "five ways" he says "and this we call God" or its equivalent,¹⁹ far from making an unjustified leap, he is merely integrating natural knowledge of God into faith. The real question arises in regard to the god of the philosopher unreached by revealed religion. To put it very concretely, is Aristotle's First Mover to be identified with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the (to use Pascal's strange phrase) "God of Jesus Christ"? Since the supernatural revelation communicates to man truths "that entirely surpass the understanding of the human mind" (to quote the dogma), we must expect that the First Mover will compare poorly with the God of supernatural revelation. But more to the point is the question: How does the First Mover compare with the God of revelation as envisaged by the *second* part of the dogma of Vatican I? There are here two questions that might profitably be put: (1) Does Aristotle's description of the First Mover include everything that can be known of God by reason, or does it overlook some of His attributes? (2) In what it *does* say of the First Mover, is this description in every point correct in regard to God, or does it make some false statements? It is sufficient for our purposes merely to answer the second of these questions; and the answer is that the description of the First Mover is not in every point a correct description of God. Thus, He is not the Creator, He has no providence or plan for the world, He is completely self-centered, He is unloving and unloved. In other respects the description *does* apply to God. He is said, e.g., to be pure act, to be immaterial and intelligent.²⁰ As applied to God, then, Aristotle's description of the First Mover must be judged to be partly true, partly false. To the extent that it is true, it is a true though inadequate knowledge of God, but to the extent that it is affirmed falsehood, it is not knowledge of God at all, but of Barth's idol. To the simple question whether the First Mover can be identified

¹⁹ *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 2, a. 3.

²⁰ Cf. F. Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy 1: Greece and Rome* (London, 1946) 314-19.

with God, the simple answer "No" must be given, for the false statements have the effect of falsifying the total conception of God. Theoretically, Aristotle could have achieved a totally (by the standard of natural theology) true understanding of God; yet, because of his human weakness, he fell short of this, with the result that the understanding he did achieve was falsified. If this was the best that the wisest of the Greeks could achieve, what more could be expected of lesser men?

These observations, I realize, do little more than support and illustrate the second part of the dogma, but they also serve to show that Barth's accusation stands against the usual Catholic exegesis of Rom 1:19-21. The fact that there is a moral necessity for the revelation of even what can be naturally known of God implies that any natural knowledge of God achieved apart from revelation, while partly true, would be falsified through being inadequate and partly false. The god thus known would not be the one true God. It is of no use to point out that this knowledge would be also partly true. Any idol has at least something in common with the true God. What makes it an idol is the fact that it is *unlike* Him in some respect. *Malum ex quocumque defectu*. It must be emphasized that these remarks are not in opposition to the affirmation of man's physical power to know God both adequately (to the extent that His nature is knowable through the universe) and accurately. What is asserted here is the moral necessity that man apart from revelation will falsify his natural knowledge of God.

REFORMULATION OF RELATION BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON

We are now in a position to attempt the promised reformulation of the relation of faith and reason in regard to God. According to de Petter, the concept is "a limited expression of an awareness of reality that is in itself unexpressed, implicit and pre-conceptual."²¹ Man, a knowing being, is confronted with the world and engaged by it in an experience that is preconceptual. He articulates this experience in the form of concepts, which constitute a true though inadequate expression of it. His concepts are the distillation of his experience. Yet his knowledge is not simply the residue of his confrontation with the world, obtained by the mechanical operation of the laws of human nature. Any system that would claim it was would be doing violence to the spirituality and the freedom of man, which are guaranteed only by a theory of fundamental option such as, e.g., Fransen's.²² In a theory of this kind man's articula-

²¹ Cited by E. Schillebeeckx, O.P., *The Concept of Truth and Theological Renewal* (London, 1968) p. 19.

²² P. Fransen, S.J., "Towards a Psychology of Divine Grace," *Lumen vitae* 12 (1957) 203-32.

tion of his experience would not be mechanical, but would be purposively directed, as a result of his adoption, in his fundamental option, of a basic set of values. By his fundamental option a man adopts one or other of the two most basic *Weltanschauungen*, viz., that which places God at the center of all things or that which places self there. According to which of these he adopts, he will progressively and consistently interpret his experience of the world in a certain way that will result in a certain conceptual knowledge. As he grows in knowledge, his world view will become more and more elaborated, subsuming other world views that are less basic but always (unless there is intellectual error) compatible. Thus, he might, at the proper stage of his development, adopt a scientific world view, which would, e.g., dispose him to accept scientific reports about distant planets but be sceptical about the existence of leprechauns. In this way his personal intellectuality is built up to full maturity. Unless intellectual error or emotional imbalance intervenes, the man who has opted for God will acquire a total world view that disposes him to accept God consciously when the opportunity is presented. He interprets his experience intellectually under the dynamism of a will directed towards God, so that in his conscious life there always remains room for eventually recognizing as his ultimate end the same God whom in his fundamental option he has already unconsciously constituted as that end. On the other hand, the man who has opted against God will, other things being equal, acquire a total world view that will dispose him against any intellectual acceptance of God. Under the dynamism of a will directed away from God, he will interpret his experience in a way that leaves no room for God in his conscious life, just as there is no room for Him in his deeper life of basic moral choice.

We are now in a position to show that in regard to faith and reason concerning God there are two logical priorities, viz., one of reason over faith and one of faith over reason. Contradiction is avoided by showing that these priorities are judged from different standpoints.

The priority of reason over faith has been thoroughly explored by Bouillard.²³ It can be expressed thus: in order that faith be a real possibility for man, he must first have the power to know God naturally. This was implied when we said above against Barth that the point of contact between God and man is already given in man's nature. Creation itself sets up a relationship between man and God. If the point of contact were first created with the proclamation of the gospel, man could not recognize it as answering his deepest needs, or indeed any of his needs. It could not create even the faintest echo in his soul. The rela-

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 24-31.

tion existing between man and God by virtue of creation attains its human expression in an achieved natural knowledge of God. The standpoint from which the priority of reason over faith is here seen to be judged is that of the possibility of faith.

This brings us to the second priority, viz., that of faith over reason. Man must believe if he is to have a suitable natural knowledge of God. This can be established in two ways. The first starts from the standpoint of the correctness of the knowledge gained. As has been said above, man has the physical power of attaining a true and adequate natural knowledge of God apart from faith, but through his finiteness and his sinfulness such is his proneness to error that he will almost inevitably falsify what natural knowledge he does attain. Revelation is morally necessary to correct this knowledge and fill it out, so that it becomes a true and adequate natural knowledge of God. It is not replaced by faith but, having been perfected, is integrated into faith. *Gratia naturam non tollit sed perficit.* The second way in which the priority of faith over reason is established starts from the standpoint of human experience. As we said above, man's knowledge depends on his fundamental option and his experience. Unless his knowledge grows out of these, it will never be more than purely notional, i.e., seen as irrelevant in the light of his total world view. (It might be thought that, as one's fundamental option must be always either for or against God, knowledge of Him could never be notional; but this is seen to be possible once it is recognized that the process of acquiring a total world view can be deformed by error.) Three cases must be distinguished, viz., the man of articulated faith, whom we shall designate henceforth as a "believer"; the man who has opted against God, whom we shall call an "unbeliever"; and the man who has opted for God but never had the opportunity of articulating his faith, which, because it is a saving faith even though unarticulated and hence fulfils the essence of faith, we shall call "essential" faith. Moreover, each of these cases will have to be considered in regard both to the nonreflective act whereby the mind is raised spontaneously from the world to God and to the philosophical proof for the existence of God, in which, of course, will emerge certain of the attributes of the divine essence as well.

No one will question that the believer's mind is raised spontaneously from the world to God. The question is: Is this a rational process? He knows God already by faith. He knows the world by experience. He knows by faith that God is the Creator of the world. To take the three attributes singled out by Paul in Rom 1, an analysis of the informal and spontaneous act whereby the believer's mind is raised from the world to God would proceed as follows—depending, of course, on causality and

analogy, which are natural to human thought: the world is permanent, therefore God is eternal; it is immense, therefore He is all-powerful; it is great, therefore He is transcendent. There is no denying that at every point this process is rational. It was the natural knowledge of God that the Jews had, and it seemed so natural to them that they thought that the Gentiles should have had it as well.

Coming to the philosophical proof, we may profitably quote the following statement of Bouillard: "The movement through which the original apprehension of God implied in all Christian faith becomes conscious of itself and makes its own rational structure, or in other words the process according to which the natural knowledge of God becomes 'natural theology,' constitutes the proof for the existence of God."²⁴ This statement reveals the real, human situation out of which the proof comes. It issues not from a thinking machine but from a man who is a philosopher but first and foremost a man of faith. Let us, for the sake of argument, say that from a philosophical point of view it is a valid proof. Believers, then, will find it philosophically convincing not simply because it is valid but also because their world view has disposed them towards its acceptance. If their philosophical opponents contend that their acceptance of the proof depends on the philosophically unprovable presuppositions of their world view, they will reply that their opponents' rejection of the proof depends not on its alleged invalidity but on *their* presuppositions, which are just as unprovable as their own. This explains the possibility of the rejection by some of a proof that was valid by definition. If, however, this makes the elaboration of such a proof appear useless because of the subjectivity of the conditions of its acceptance, it should be remembered that it has been for a long time a philosophical commonplace that the gulfs between certain philosophical systems are unbridgeable; that at any rate it fills a real need in the life of the believing philosopher; and that, while admittedly there is a subjective element, it will not be seen as *purely* subjective by one who can accept St. Thomas' view of the objectivity of human nature and its natural inclination.²⁵ In short, the believing philosopher will accept the proof as philosophically valid.

We turn now to the unbeliever. Confronted with the world, his mind will not be raised to the contemplation of God. Enough has been said about his world view to show that there is no reason for expecting that the world would suggest God to him. He will appreciate its permanence, immensity, and greatness, but only as immanent in it. A fortiori he will remain unconvinced by any proof for the existence of God. His world

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁵ Cf. G. de Broglie, S.J., *Revelation and Reason* (London, 1965) p. 86.

view has furnished him with a set of presuppositions that dispose him against accepting such a proof.

Finally we consider the man of essential faith. He has already affirmed God in his heart and now only awaits the opportunity to articulate his faith with the aid of the external world. Had he existed in the state of pure nature, confrontation with the world would have awakened in his mind the natural knowledge of God; for in this hypothesis his ultimate end would have been God as known and loved naturally, and it would have been contrary to the nature of God to create a being incapable of attaining its end. In fact, however, man lives in a dispensation in which the realities are his own sin and the grace of God. One of the effects of sin is a certain darkening of the intellect, so that of itself the world no longer speaks to man so clearly about God its Creator.²⁶ Hence also for the man of essential faith there exists a moral impossibility of making a nonreflective act of natural knowledge of God.

The same must be said, and for the same reason, in regard to the possibility that this man should elaborate for himself a philosophical proof for the existence of God. In regard, however, to accepting such a proof when it is presented to him by others, the situation is different. Provided that the proof is valid and that the subjective conditions for its acceptance that we have spoken of above are verified, he will be enabled by the proof to articulate his belief in God. The proof is the product of believing men, who by it are articulating the natural apprehension of God that underlies their faith. Through his confrontation with the proof, therefore, he begins to be drawn into their community, which is the Church; he finds outside himself the answer to the supreme question, to which he has already in his heart answered in the affirmative.

In all but one of these cases a priority of faith over reason, in the sense of articulated faith over consciously held natural knowledge, is clearly seen, the exception being the case in which the man of essential faith is confronted with the proof for the existence of God, in which case articulated faith and natural knowledge dawn together; but even here there exists a priority of faith over reason, for it is precisely his essential faith that enables this man to attain with the aid of the proof his natural knowledge of God. Hence we can conclude that from the standpoint of the experience of human cognition there exists for man in regard to the existence and nature of God a priority of faith over reason: he must believe in order that he may know.

We conclude that, while there exists for man the physical possibility of knowing God by reason apart from faith, there is a moral impossi-

²⁶ Cf. *DS* 371, 1511.

bility of thus knowing him. We have established two priorities, viz., one of reason over faith, and this from the standpoint of the possibility of faith, and one of faith over reason, and this from the double standpoint of the correctness of the knowledge gained and the experience of human cognition. We do not incur the condemnation of the principle of contradiction, for the two priorities are judged from different standpoints and are not necessarily to be taken in a chronological sense. As to the question of what happens chronologically, man's opportunities to know God naturally by reason and supernaturally by faith are simultaneous. St. Thomas holds that as soon as man begins to know, the grace of God begins to make a claim on him.²⁷ If a man is born into the believing community of the Church, his knowledge and his faith will dawn together; if not, with the dawn of reason he may choose God in unarticulated knowledge and faith, and when later the opportunity of articulating his faith presents itself, so also, and simultaneously, does the opportunity of articulating his natural knowledge.²⁸

Let us confirm this conclusion by another argument. Catholic theology has always maintained that man has only one end, and that a supernatural one that subsumes, without destroying, his natural end. Implicit in this is that the means whereby he would have attained his natural end no longer exist independently but are subsumed into the means whereby he attains his supernatural end, viz., faith and charity. It follows from this that natural knowledge of God cannot exist on its own but must be integrated into faith. This is an appropriate place for distinguishing the thesis of this paper from the fideism of Barth. Whereas he, holding a Protestant view of human nature as intrinsically corrupted by original sin, maintains that there is no natural knowledge of God and that therefore the only knowledge that we have of him is that of faith, we have with Vatican I affirmed natural knowledge of God, not as existing independently of faith, but as integrated into faith. If our solution veers away from the extreme position adopted by some Catholics in the direction of Barthianism, it does not go beyond a position that is strictly orthodox, viz., that man's natural powers of knowing God have been affected for the worse by sin.

As was noted in the first paragraph of this paper, Vatican I adopted an exegesis of the pericope of Rom 1 that we have rejected.²⁹ This does not mean, however, that we stand condemned by the Council. The

²⁷ This is his "theory of the infant," repeated many times throughout his works; see *Sum. theol.* 1-2, q. 89, a. 6 c, and ad 3m.

²⁸ Cf. D. Coffey, "The Salvation of the Unbeliever in St. Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Maritain," *Australasian Catholic Record* 41 (1964) 179-98, 265-82.

²⁹ Cf. n. 1 above.

rules of interpretation of magisterial statements do not require us to accept everything contained in them as of equal weight. The doctrine contained in this statement of the Council is the distinction between the two orders of revelation, natural and supernatural, a distinction that has been endorsed throughout this paper. The reference to Rom 1 is nothing more than an illustration of the doctrine, and hence does not enjoy magisterial authority. Indeed, one of the factors that make possible a development of doctrine is the fact that theologians are not bound to the relatively simplistic exegetical methods of former times.

The general doctrine of the Bible on the question of natural knowledge of God is that, while the chosen race are the ones who know Him, the Gentiles are *able* to know Him, although in fact they never achieve this knowledge. To this, Rom 1, contrary to first appearances, is no exception; for the knowledge that the Gentiles are there said to have achieved was, in the mind of Paul, a participation in the revelation made to Adam. The doctrine of Vatican I does not go beyond the insight of the Bible in this matter, although it reaffirmed it in the face of contemporary problems. Vatican I did not succeed in relating faith and reason in a truly satisfactory way. While upholding its doctrine of the possibility of natural knowledge of God, we hope we have shown in this paper that for man confronted with God there exists a mutual interdependence of faith and reason.