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PRIMAL REVELATION AND THE NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: BRUNNER AND CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

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Protestant and Catholic theologians today are seeking a more thorough knowledge of each other's thought in an effort to work together toward a more adequate understanding of the revelation given in Christ. At the same time they seek to delimit more clearly the areas of disagreement that separate them. One of these areas is the doctrine concerning the primal revelation and the natural knowledge of God. In this area, the Catholic theologian finds a special interest in the position represented by Emil Brunner of Zürich, for Brunner over a period of years has consistently defended a mediate position between that of the earlier Karl Barth and Catholic theology. Moreover, the Catholic theologian can learn much from a study of a position which is at the same time so near and yet so far from his own.

Emil Brunner's doctrine concerning the original revelation in creation has been formulated and polished in controversy with Karl Barth, receiving its impetus in 1934 from Brunner's *Natur und Gnade* and Barth's response: *Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner.* In 1937, at the conclusion of *Der Mensch im Widerspruch*, Brunner felt that "the opposition between Barth and me consists mainly in two points: that I, in opposition to Barth, but in harmony with the Scriptures and the Reformers, maintain that God even now is manifest in His

creation, and secondly, that I do not view the human existence of man as a bagatelle, but as a theologically relevant fact, which can only be understood from the idea of the image of God."[1] In 1941, Brunner charged that the source of Barth's denial of this biblical and traditional doctrine of a primal revelation in creation lay in his failure to distinguish the *principium cognoscendi* from the *principium essendi*, "because he thinks that the recognition of a revelation in creation must have as its consequence the recognition of a natural knowledge of God."[2] This consequence Brunner has always denied, and again in 1946 he reiterated that "on the one hand, the reality of the revelation in creation must be acknowledged, but on the other hand, the possibility of a correct, valid natural knowledge of God must be denied."[3]

Brunner specifies that this primal revelation is still present to us in two forms: in man created according to God's image, and in the created world as the manifestation of the divine power and wisdom. This article will limit itself to a discussion of the second form of the primal revelation.

CREATED WORLD AS MANIFESTATION OF GOD'S POWER AND WISDOM

The whole Christian tradition is unanimous in recognizing a

[1]Emil Brunner, *Der Mensch im Widerspruch* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1937), 541 (all translations from this source are the author's own).

[2]Emil Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1941), 80 (all translations from this source are the author's own).

[3]Emil Brunner, *Dogmatik* I (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1946), 138 (all translations from this source are the author's own). It is to be noted that in the course of time it has been Barth who has modified his position. In 1950, in Volume 3, Part 3 of the *Dogmatik*, he is willing to admit a manifestation of God in creation which only the believer can perceive, whose eyes have been opened by the revelation in Christ. Cf. Emil Brunner, *Dogmatik* III/3 (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1960), 58-59; Henri Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III (Paris: Aubier, 1957), 131-132 (all translations from this source are the author's own).

revelation of God in the created world. The Church Fathers, the Scholastics, and the Reformers all insist on this point, because Scripture teaches it beyond the shadow of a doubt.[4] As early as 1927, long before his controversy with Barth, Brunner wrote: "It is impossible to believe in a Christian manner in a unique revelation, in the Mediator, without believing in a general revelation of God in creation."[5] Apart from the Old Testament, he believes that the clear testimony of Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans (1:19ff.) should be sufficient to convince any Christian. Here Paul teaches that the "natural man," to whom the message of salvation is addressed, lives in the sphere of God's anger, because he has sinned against the truth which was made known to him, for "what may be known about God is manifest to them. For God has manifested it to them (Rom. 1:19)." The conclusion to be drawn seems more than evident to Brunner. "Therefore, the revelation of God is not lacking. God has revealed Himself to all."[6]

But Paul becomes even more explicit. "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen—His everlasting power also and His divinity—being understood through the things that are made (Rom. 1:20)." In this sentence of Paul, Brunner sees a basis for affirming that the general revelation given to all men is a "revelation of creation" in two senses: first, inasmuch as this revelation has been present to men since the creation of the world; second, inasmuch as this revelation takes place through the works of creation. Furthermore, because the text states that this revelation can be perceived by an act of *noesis*, by an act of man's reason, the revelation is addressed to man as a rational being. Man has been purposely created in such a way that he might be able to hear and perceive the Word of God as manifested in creation. A final point that Brunner makes in relation to v. 20 is that Paul does not merely teach the possibility of a knowledge of

[4]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 60.

[5]Emil Brunner, *Der Mittler* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1927), 13 (all translations from this source are the author's own).

[6]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 64.

God from creation, which man once possessed but lost, nor does he teach merely that man has a present possibility of knowing God from creation. Rather, Paul insists that man possesses an actual knowledge of God, although this knowledge, as a result of sin, is immediately changed into a delusion. It is a knowledge, therefore, "which does not operate as knowledge, but which, through the ferment of sin, is converted into idolatry."[7]

Brunner explains that the reason for Paul's insistence on man's actual knowledge of God is that he wishes to demonstrate that man is guilty before God, that the message of salvation in Jesus Christ comes to men who are themselves responsible for the state in which they find themselves, because they have refused to act according to the revelation given to them. Without this general revelation before Christ and the prophets, man would not be responsible and therefore would not be a sinner. But now he has known, and he has suppressed this truth about God "in unrighteousness." "Every man is a sinner, because every man could know God, and actually knows Him, but as a result of his defiance, man suppresses this knowledge, does not let it take effect, but transforms it into folly."[8]

Brunner finds this same teaching concerning the revelation of God in creation contained in Rom. 1:28-32, Jn. 1:4, and Acts 14:17, 17:27. It is this teaching which is the foundation for the assertion of man's responsibility before God. It is the presupposition for the call to repentance proclaimed by the missionary.[9]

But even if this "revelation of creation" were not expressly taught in the Bible, it is implicitly contained in the biblical notion of creation. God manifests Himself in the works of His creation; the works of God's creation in turn reflect back on the Creator. Brunner is aware that creatures veil God as much as, or more than, they reveal Him. But

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[7]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 65.

[8]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 65.

[9]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 65-66.

the infinite qualitative difference between Creator and creature, the vast chasm that separates them, is no reason for denying what Saint Paul affirms, "that precisely the divinity of God, His invisible nature, His superiority over the world manifests itself in the works of creation."[10] Paul says this because it is true, and it is true because God willed it to be true. "God's will and nature are such that He creates in order to reveal Himself. Creation bears the imprint of its Creator because of His creative will and His creative act."[11]

For this reason, Brunner can see no cause for mistrusting or denying the doctrine of the analogy of being. He finds that it has been the commonly held doctrine of the Church from the beginning, and that it expresses nothing else than the fact that it has pleased God to create the world in such a way that it reflects "His eternal power and divinity." But, Brunner adds, this does not mean that man actually sees God in creation as He really is. It does mean that creation is an objective vehicle or means for the revelation of God, whether man recognize it as such or not.[12]

But if men do not perceive the objective revelation of God in creation, it is not because they do not possess the subjective capacity to do so. Paul insists that "since the creation of the world, His invisible nature is clearly seen ... being understood through the things that are made." Brunner interprets this to mean that man has known God from creation with his intellect. Man has been so created that he might be able to know God through the works of creation. For this purpose, God has given him an intellect. Through this special possession of man, the objective "revelation of creation" becomes "general revelation," for the objective means of revelation and the subjective capacity of knowing are ordered to one another.[13]

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[10]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 68.

[11]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 68.

[12]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 68-69.

[13]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 69.

Yet despite the objective revelation of God in creation, and despite man's possession of an intellect which was given to him precisely that he might be able to recognize God as manifested in the works of creation, man does not truly know God from creation. Brunner insists that man possesses no true natural knowledge of God, that there is no "natural theology." "Rather, man's sin consists precisely in this, that he suppresses the knowledge of God that arises in him through God's revelation, so that the revelation that God has given for a knowledge of Himself becomes for man the origin of his idolatry."[14]

On the other hand, Brunner does not mean to say that man possesses absolutely no knowledge of God from the revelation in creation. He does not wish to deny that man knows about God in some way. His thought is summed up in the following dialectic which he finds in Saint Paul: "that man could not be a sinner, if he did not know about God, but that because he is a sinner, and insofar as he, as a sinner, remains in self-isolation, man cannot know God correctly.... His knowledge of God is as perverted as his heart."[15]

Man, therefore, knows enough about God from the revelation in creation to make him guilty and responsible for his sin. But because it is a knowledge corrupted by sin, it cannot become a knowledge of God "which actually takes effect";[16] it cannot become a true knowledge; it cannot develop into a natural theology,[17] nor can it save man from his

[14]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 66.

[15]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 66.

[16]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 66: " ... faktisch sich auswirkende Gotteserkenntnis."

[17]In his debate with Barth, Brunner spoke favorably of a Christian natural theology or objective natural theology (cf. Emil Brunner, *Natur und Gnade*, 2nd ed. [Tübingen: Mohr, 1935], v, 50 [all translations from this source are the author's own]). By this he meant the "doctrine of the objective knowability of God in His works of creation, as is possible only within Christian theology, i.e., only on the basis of the revelation in Christ, the Holy Scriptures and the illumination of the Spirit...." (Brunner, *Natur und Gnade*, 50). In fact, Brunner finds that the

sin. The Bible does not say that sin has obliterated the perceptibility of God in His creation. "What is said is this: that sin ... has made man blind for that which is visibly set before his eyes. Precisely for this reason are men without excuse, because they do not want to recognize God, who has manifested Himself to them so clearly."[18] Only the believer in Jesus Christ, with the guidance of Scripture, can see in creation the true God and not idols.[19] Only through the revelation in Christ can man see the revelation of God as it really is.[20]

Despite these limitations, Brunner maintains that the "revelation of creation" is of fundamental importance, that it cannot be denied without disastrous consequences. "Only through this revelation ... is man responsible for his sins; only because of it can the gospel's call to repentance be proclaimed as a call for a return to what was in the beginning. It is therefore the indispensable presupposition for the Good News of Christ and, as such, an integral part of the good tidings concerning God's saving grace."[21]

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explanation of Romans 1 and 2, as well as the interpretation of the first article of the Creed, impose this task on theology. At the same time, however, Brunner denied the possibility of a rational natural theology independent of the revelation in Christ. He called this natural theology in the subjective sense (Brunner, *Natur und Gnade*, v, 50). Because his use of the term "Christian natural theology" occasioned misunderstanding of his thought by Barth, Brunner preferred thereafter to speak rather of the Christian teaching concerning the revelation of God in creation or in nature (cf. Brunner, *Natur und Gnade*, v, 60). At the same time he reserved the term "natural theology," which for many Protestants carried ominous connotations, for the rational, subjective natural theology which he repudiates and which he associates with the Catholic Church. The term "natural theology" has this latter sense in the text.

[18]Brunner, *Natur und Gnade*, 12.

[19]Brunner, *Natur und Gnade*, 12.

[20]Brunner, *Natur und Gnade*, 14, 46.

[21]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 67.

BRUNNER'S DOCTRINE AND CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

It is clear from the exposition of Brunner's position that it is rather close to the Catholic position, perhaps closer than Brunner himself realizes. Brunner's interpretation of Rom. 1:19ff. is clear, accurate, and faithful. It penetrates to the heart of the dialectic of Paul's thought: Because God has revealed Himself in created reality since the creation of the world, man from the time of Adam to the present perceives the invisible reality of God in the contemplation of what God has made. Yet man, as he is found to be from the time of Adam, and as he is represented in the Gentile, has refused to acknowledge God in gratitude, and so his heart is now darkened and without insight. God appears now only in the gods, but even this misunderstanding of God includes a knowledge, or better, something like a knowledge of God. In these gods, man still holds God fast, and in them he still knows of God. But he does not know of Him as God, i.e., as the "true and living" God to whom he must be converted.[22] The Apostle affirms the coexistence in the pagan of a knowledge of God and a lack of knowledge of God at the same time. He simultaneously knows God and does not know Him. At the center of this paradox stands the interior dialectic of culpable nonrecognition of God. The knowledge that the pagan has of God makes his idolatry inexcusable, and this idolatry, which is refusal to acknowledge God, obscures the knowledge that it presupposes.[23]

Furthermore, it is not Paul's intention here to invite the pagans to elaborate a natural theology. If he admits that the pagans have a certain knowledge of God, he knows at the same time that they have refused to acknowledge and recognize Him. In Paul's eyes, they will only *de*

[22]Cf. Heinrich Schlier, "Die Erkenntnis Gottes nach den Briefen des Apostels Paulus," in *Gott in Welt* I, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 515-522.

[23]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 121-122.

facto rediscover God when they are rediscovered by God through the revelation in Christ. They will only know the true God by believing in the gospel.

The Catholic theologian up to this point finds himself in agreement with Brunner. But when Brunner, on the basis of his accurate analysis and with an appeal to the Reformation theology concerning the radical corruption of man by sin, draws the theological conclusion from the affirmations of Paul "that sinful man is incapable of raising himself from his idolatrous superstition to a true knowledge of God, without being enlightened by a special, historical revelation,"[24] that "this natural knowledge of God *necessarily* becomes, in sinful man, idolatry, or, what is again fundamentally the same thing—an abstract impersonal knowledge of God,"[25] he appears to have gone beyond Paul's statement of fact and transformed it into a universally applicable affirmation of radical impossibility. Paul does not assert this radical impossibility that Brunner deduces from his statements. Paul contents himself with a general constatation of a general fact: the pagans have suppressed the knowledge of God received from the revelation in creation and have turned to idols. He does not say that they could not have done otherwise.

Such a step beyond Paul's statement of fact is all the more unjustified when it is remembered that "Paul's method consists in making use of massive affirmations" which intend to give a general picture without descending to the particular cases of individuals. This can never be forgotten "if we do not wish to risk deforming his thought."[26] Therefore, it would appear that Brunner's denial of the *possibility* of a correct, valid natural knowledge of God cannot claim as its basis Rom. 1:19ff. Paul does not teach there that the pagans *necessarily*

[24]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 66.

[25]Brunner, *Dogmatik* I, 138.

[26]André Feuillet, "La connaissance naturelle de Dieu d'après Romains, I, 18-23," *Lumière et vie* 14 (1954), 65 (author's own translation).

perverted the knowledge of God received from the primal revelation. He simply affirms that they have done so as a group.

Ultimately, however, the basis for Brunner's insistence on the radical impossibility of natural man to attain a true knowledge of God from creation is not to be found in Rom. 1:19ff., but in the postulate of the radical corruption of man by sin and in the dogma of *sola gratia.* Brunner admits as much when he writes:

> If it is false and biblically-theologically impossible to dispute the reality of the revelation in creation, then it is no less false to deny the negative significance of sin for our knowledge of the revelation in creation. Sin does not only change our will, but effects as well a "darkening" of the faculties of knowledge where there is question of the knowledge of God. Therefore, whoever affirms a "natural theology" in the sense of correct, valid knowledge [of God], denies by that very fact the reality of sin, or at least its effects in the sphere of our knowledge of God.[27]

However, it is not the effects of sin in the sphere of our knowledge of God that Catholic tradition denies, but the exaggeration of these very real and crippling effects. Brunner himself admits that sin does not destroy man's intellect. "Sin and faith, false and true relation to God, both presuppose the formal reason, the faculty of thought."[28] But it has disturbed this faculty's functioning in such a way that "the nearer anything lies to that center of existence where the whole of existence, i.e., the relation to God and the being of the person, is involved, all the greater is the disturbance of the knowledge of reason by sin; the farther anything lies from this center, the less influence this source of disturbance exercises...."[29] As a result of sin, therefore, man's "inner eye is not a clear mirror, in which God's revelation in creation mirrors itself in its truth, but an eye clouded by sinful anguish and sinful pride,

[27]Brunner, *Dogmatik* I, 138.

[28]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 378.

[29]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 378.

sinful optimism and sinful pessimism."[30] All of these statements are echoed as well in the writings of Catholic theologians. But there is nothing in them which should force Brunner to conclude that a true natural knowledge of God is impossible for man with a radical impossibility. The "moral impossibility" of the Catholic tradition appears to be a better interpretation of the facts.

There can be no doubt that Paul's affirmations imply that without the revelation in Christ it is extremely difficult or morally impossible for sinful man to arrive at a true knowledge of God from the sole revelation in creation. For this reason, the First Vatican Council affirmed that it is due to the revelation in Christ that the divine realities which are not in themselves inaccessible to human reason can be known by all without difficulty, with firm certitude, and without mixture of error.[31] Catholic theology, therefore, while defending the radical possibility of a natural knowledge of God from creation, has always insisted as well that this radical power of knowing God is in fact exercised in a correct manner by sinful humanity only with the greatest difficulty except in dependence upon the Christian revelation. Pius XII formally explained that this difficulty springs from the sinful condition of humanity:

> However, there are many obstacles hindering this same reason from using its natural power [of knowing God] efficaciously and with profit; for the truths which concern God and the relations which exist between God and man absolutely transcend the order of sensible things; and since they impel to action and influence life, they demand self-dedication and self-renunciation. In acquiring such truths, the intellect of man suffers many difficulties because of the senses and imagination and because of evil desires born of original sin.[32]

The primary interest of this passage is to show that the knowledge

[30]Emil Brunner, *Dogmatik* II (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1950), 28 (all translations from this source are the author's own).

[31]Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, 32nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 3005 (all translations from this source are the author's own).

[32]Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, 3875.

of God is a special kind of knowledge which can only be accomplished in an acknowledgment of God in one's life and in self-surrender, and that it therefore labors under difficulties of a unique order, which do not spring primarily from weakness of intellect, but from a spiritual disorder which makes us instinctive rebels against God and distorters of the truth. "For in this order of reality men willingly persuade themselves that what they do not wish to be true is false or at least doubtful." Pius XII concludes from this condition of sinful man that the revelation in Christ was morally necessary for all men to know God easily, with certitude, and without error.[33]

Therefore, in affirming the radical possibility of a correct natural knowledge of God, the Catholic theologian does not "deny by that very fact the reality of sin, or at least its effects in the sphere of our knowledge of God," as Brunner believes.[34] In fact, some Catholic theologians, in the tradition of Augustine and Bonaventure, insist that the natural powers of man wounded by original sin can only be activated, even in the natural sphere, when they have been purified through faith in the revelation of Christ and the grace of Christ.[35] But when the Catholic theologian affirms the radical possibility of a natural knowledge of God even for sinful man, he is not necessarily affirming that this possibility was ever activated in history independently of grace. What he is affirming is that "the faith in the God of the Bible is not an arbitrary act, that when we confess 'God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ', the word 'God' has a meaning *for us*, and that the moment we confess as certain the reality of this God, this certitude is founded according to the exigencies of our reason and with respect to our human consciousness."[36] In other words, the possibility of the natural knowledge of God is the transcendental condition of the

[33]Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, 3876.

[34]Brunner, *Dogmatik* I, 138.

[35]Michael Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik* I, 6th ed. (Munich: Hueber, 1960), 219.

[36]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 111.

knowledge of faith. "The knowledge of faith demands and implies, as its transcendental condition, a natural knowledge of God, a knowledge proper to man, which most often remains implicit, but is susceptible of rational explicitation."[37]

The foundation of this assertion can be expressed in the words of J. Maréchal: "All knowledge being an immanent operation, the conditions which proximately determine for the consciousness of the subject the objective or subjective value of his knowledge ought to be found in the subject himself. Those conditions which would remain totally extrinsic to the subject would be nonexistent as far as the consciousness of the subject is concerned. An object is known according to the mode and extent of its 'interiority' in the subject."[38]

Thus, the possibility of a knowledge of God in faith demands and implies a double condition: (1) the revelation and grace of Jesus Christ, and (2) the natural ability of the human reason to know God. The first conditions faith as event; the second is the transcendental condition of faith as *meaning*, and as meaning *for us*.[39] If *we* are to know God in faith, we must admit the possibility of a natural knowledge of God which is actuated in faith. This possibility of a natural knowledge of God constitutes the subjective foundation of the Christian faith as the transcendental condition of the knowledge of faith. This knowledge need not precede faith, but it is necessarily implied as a rational condition of the knowledge of faith. Nor is this knowledge an idol. It is the internal condition by means of which man can discern the God of the Bible from idols, and acknowledge Him without making Him an idol.[40]

Since this is the point of the Catholic theologian's affirmation of

[37]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 138.

[38]Joseph Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique* V (Louvain-Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1926), 254 (author's own translation).

[39]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 103.

[40]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 112.

the possibility of a true natural knowledge of God, many of Brunner's objections become pointless. Brunner appeals to the fact that no pagan philosopher ever attained a knowledge of the living God. He points to the fact that even the god of theism, "which is the closest approximation of the biblical creator that reason left to itself is capable of,"[41] is not the living God of the Bible. He emphasizes the fact that the historical forms of the natural knowledge of God in non-Christian religions and philosophies are an ambiguous phenomenon in which can be discovered at the same time an idea of the true God and its perversion.[42] These observations do not touch the position of the Catholic theologian.

Catholic theology, moreover, is far from granting validity to all the historical phenomena which presented themselves in the course of history as natural theology or natural knowledge of God. "It professes that man is a sinner, that the discovery of God is always under a certain aspect a conversion, and that man is always in danger of lowering God to his own level and of not seeing in Him more than a magnified replica of himself or the ideal sum of his own possibilities."[43] But it does insist that the knowledge of God in faith demands and implies, as its transcendental condition, a natural knowledge of God, a knowledge immanent to man, which most often remains implicit, but which is capable of rational explicitation.[44]

This does not mean that in the process by which man comes to believe in the Christian faith a natural knowledge of God must chronologically precede the knowledge of faith. In this respect, Brunner's critique of certain Catholic theologians who distinguish nature and grace, reason and revelation, like a first story and second story of a building, and who clearly separate them by a horizontal, is

[41]Brunner, *Dogmatik* I, 161.

[42]Brunner, *Dogmatik* I, 139.

[43]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 103.

[44]Henri Bouillard, "Le refus de la théologie naturelle dans la théologie protestante contemporaine," in *L' Existence de Dieu* (Tournai: Casterman, 1961), 107.

completely justified.[45] But it means that at least the knowledge of faith implies and contains the rational element of the natural knowledge of God. Naturally, this latter need not be explicitated; it is not required that we possess a reflex consciousness of it, nor is it necessary for it to have been systematized in the form of organized, rational knowledge.[46] But it is essential that this original, implicit seizure of God by the intellect be present and that its explicitation be possible, otherwise "we would possess no basis for judging the validity of the recognition of a divine revelation in history; nothing would authorize us to affirm that the God of the Bible is our God."[47]

Therefore, the Catholic tradition does not impose the recognition of one or other of the historical forms of natural theology as the true and valid natural knowledge of God. It can even admit with Brunner that its explicit historical forms in non-Christian religions and philosophies have frequently been "idolatrous shadows of the true God."[48] What it does defend is the principle that a natural knowledge of God is a possibility, as the transcendental condition of the Christian faith itself, as the a priori, unformulated knowledge which is exercised in the knowledge of faith itself, and without which it would be impossible to recognize the God of biblical revelation and faith as our God.

Furthermore, Saint Paul himself in his letter to the Romans invites us to admit the actual existence of a knowledge of God even outside explicit Christian faith, even at the interior of idolatry. What else does Brunner himself admit when he maintains that Paul in his letter to the Romans preaches that the pagans are without excuse for their idolatry because they actually possess a "certain" knowledge of God, or when he says that "the natural 'knowledge' of God is always an inextricable

[45]Brunner, *Natur und Gnade*, 33.

[46]L. Malevez, "Le croyant et le philosophe," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 82 (1960), 911-912.

[47]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 102.

[48]Brunner, *Natur und Gnade*, 46.

mixture of true knowledge and deification of creatures"?[49] What else can this "certain" knowledge and this "true" knowledge which makes man culpable be, than what Catholic theology calls the implicit and spontaneous seizure of God from which spring and originate the historical concepts of god, no matter how perverted and inadequate they may be?

What enables Brunner to give an apparent reasonableness to his insistence on the absolute impossibility for man to acquire a true and valid natural knowledge of God is his excessively exigent definition of "true and valid" knowledge of God. For Brunner, a true knowledge of God must be a knowledge of God as the living, personal, holy, and merciful Lord and Father precisely as manifested in the Christian revelation. Furthermore, it must be a knowledge which is the abolition of sin.[50] But this is to demand not merely a true knowledge, but a more perfect and complete knowledge. There is here an apparent identification of incomplete knowledge and untrue knowledge. Naturally, there is a vast difference between the knowledge of God resulting from faith in Jesus Christ, and the knowledge of God that can be attained from the primal revelation in and through the created world. The latter tells man nothing of the interior of the triune God, of His definitive attitude toward sinful man, of His redeeming love and mercy. It does not give man a knowledge of the self-communicating Thou of the Bible who enters into personal communion with man in his history. "Although in the two cases there is question of the same God ... we do not know Him under the same aspect, for we do not know Him in each case by the same process, nor in the same light."[51] What is more, "the God of faith, in His very Being, transports us infinitely

[49]Brunner, *Dogmatik* II, 28.

[50]Brunner, *Natur und Gnade*, 19.

[51]Maurice Corvez, "Foi en Dieu et connaissance naturelle de l'existence de Dieu," *Lumière et vie* 14 (1954), 18 (all translations from this source are the author's own). Cf. Henri D. Robert, "Connaissance et inconnaissance de Dieu, au plan de la raison," in *L'Existence de Dieu*, 339-342.

above the God of reason."[52] Compared with the knowledge of faith, the knowledge attainable as the result of the revelation in creation appears superficial. Above all else, reason alone cannot establish a friendship between God and man, nor does its light involve vital communion,[53] and yet, though the knowledge of God possible from creation will always remain inadequate (as, however, is all our knowledge of God), it is nevertheless correct, valid, and true. It reflects something of the reality—though weakly and inadequately. "Since we are not able to think of God as He is, we follow the course, as wise as it is humble ... of thinking of Him as we are. We qualify Him according to our relations with Him; and as these relations are real, we say what is true, although as a definition it may be insufficient to the point of being none at all."[54] But though it is a humble knowledge, it is a true knowledge, because "a thought more profound inspires this course of action, because a light more mysterious illumines this knowledge."[55]

Brunner further postulates that "the God who is known from the world is always only the Demiurge, the ground of the world, the 'necessary nature'."[56] He insists with Luther that "abstract-speculative thought by means of the analogy of being and the idea of truth does not lead to the true God, but into the *merae tenebrae rationis.*"[57] Against Bonaventure, he writes that "the ascent of the soul to God is a road that leads nowhere; the *itinerarium mentis in Deum* does not lead to the living

[52]Corvez, "Foi en Dieu et connaissance naturelle de l'existence de Dieu," 18-19.

[53]Corvez, "Foi en Dieu et connaissance naturelle de l'existence de Dieu," 20.

[54]Antonin Sertillanges, in (St. Thomas') *Somme théologique: Dieu* III (Paris: Desclée, 1925), 343 (author's own translation).

[55]Henri de Lubac, *Sur les chemins de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier, 1956), 112 (all translations from this source are the author's own).

[56]Brunner, *Der Mittler*, 237.

[57]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 315.

God, but to the abstract *ens realissimum* of Neoplatonic speculation."[58] The reason for this is that sin has perverted man's reason, and in this context this perversion is, more exactly, abstraction. The God found in this way has nothing to do with the God of the Bible. He stands in the relation of either-or to Him.[59] It is interesting to note that the first quotation of this paragraph, taken from *Der Mittler*, was supported by an appeal to Kant.[60] Though in his more recent writings Brunner appeals to the fact of sin and not to Kant as the basis for similar statements, one wonders how much the Kantian analysis is still unconsciously at the base of Brunner's opposition to the validity of a natural knowledge of God from creation and his insistence upon the radical difference and opposition between the God of reason and the God of revelation.

Brunner appears to take it for granted that any natural knowledge of God from reason proceeds from man's initiative alone, whereas in fact man is always merely the one who reacts to the manifestation of Himself initiated by God in creation. For this reason, natural knowledge of God need not be regarded as an autonomous attempt by man's reason to construct for itself and by itself a knowledge of God, nor must it necessarily result in an impersonal abstraction. It can be the recognition of the personal God who makes signs to me through His creation.

> For it is not my spirit which makes the first step to raise itself to God from the world; it is God who by the world descends in a certain manner to my spirit. No matter how spontaneous it may be, the proof that I fashion for myself only comes as the second element. However active it may be, it is only a reaction. Whereas the proof is fabricated by me, the sign which precedes it and already contains it, which authorizes it and provokes it, which sets it in motion and which always surpasses it, is made to me by another. In all truth, *Dieu me fait signe.*[61]

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[58]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 315.

[59]Brunner, *Dogmatik* I, 160.

[60]Brunner, *Der Mittler*, 237, note 1.

[61]de Lubac, *Sur les chemins de Dieu*, 109. Cf. Robert, "Connaissance et inconnaissance de Dieu, au plan de la raison," 349ff.

The knowledge that results from the encounter with such a sign is not an abstraction, but the concrete apprehension of God; at least, it can be.

If, in fact, men have found only an impersonal abstraction, merely a first mover, this is due, no doubt, to the effects of sin on man's reason and will, but it was not and is not impossible for man to do otherwise. The God found by man's intellect in reaction to the revelation in creation need not necessarily stand in a relation of either-or to the God of the Bible. For if it is true, as E. Gilson admits,[62] that the prime mover is not Jahweh, still Jahweh is the prime mover. The knowledge of Him from creation may be obscure and woefully incomplete in comparison with what God has revealed of Himself in Jesus Christ, or even in comparison with what God has actually revealed of Himself in creation, for Saint Thomas agrees that our intellect has been so weakened that it cannot receive everything that creatures manifest about God.[63] Furthermore, the God of faith infinitely transcends the God whose existence the philosopher proves. Nonetheless, this knowledge "is, in its origin, completely concrete, even when it follows the path of logic and abstraction, because it is that of a *presence.*"[64] For this reason, Brunner's disdain for the knowledge of God which results from the reaction of man's intellect to God's revelation of Himself in creation proceeds in part from a misunderstanding of the true nature of this type of knowledge.

If, in its natural knowledge of God, man's intellect alone took all the initiative, what Brunner says might be true, for he is correct in insisting that "the true God can only be known in His descent to us."[65] But that descent cannot be limited to the revelation in Christ

[62]Etienne Gilson, *Introduction à la philosophie chrétienne* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1960), 22.

[63]Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* 5, a. 2, ad 2m.

[64]de Lubac, *Sur les chemins de Dieu*, 110.

[65]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 315.

alone.[66] There can be no doubt that "the reasoning process to which I would not be provoked, which would not result from a stimulation and from an essential impulsion, would only give me a knowledge that was totally indirect and completely abstract. It would only furnish me with a pure concept that took the place of a being that was *absent*—or rather of a thing that was absent."[67] But this is not the case. God is present, revealing Himself to man's reason, in creation, and therefore, in fact, "under the abstraction that comes from me, the true God reveals Himself as present."[68]

Consequently, Brunner's insight remains true: "The true God can only be known in His descent to us."[69] But this descent occurred not merely in the revelation in Christ, but in the revelation in creation as well, and, as Brunner also teaches, this revelation is not merely a thing of the past, but is continually present to every man. It remains true that *Gottes Wesen ist Offenbarungswesen*,[70] which can only be known through revelation and in revelation.[71]

Therefore, the final word must be: "Idea of the Good, the First Mover, the Necessary Being, One Superior to being, Universal Principle, Deity without form or name—God of the Patriarchs, God of Moses and Isaiah, Sovereign Master, Awe-inspiring Judge, King of History, Father of Jesus ... from the one to the other there extends an abyss; and yet it is, or at least it can be, the same God."[72]

In this "at least, it can be" lies the difference between Brunner

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[66]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 315.

[67]de Lubac, *Sur les chemins de Dieu*, 110.

[68]de Lubac, *Sur les chemins de Dieu*, 110.

[69]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 315.

[70]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 383.

[71]Brunner, *Dogmatik* I, 201.

[72]de Lubac, *Sur les chemins de Dieu*, 137.

and the Catholic theologian. The latter insists on this "at least, it can be," because the negation of the possibility for the human reason in reaction to the revelation in creation to arrive at a true and valid natural knowledge of God logically leads to skepticism in the domain of religion. If human reason cannot naturally know God without revelation in Christ, how can it know God even with the revelation in Christ? For within the very act of faith itself, the human intellect is called upon to exercise its natural function of knowing God. As we have seen, "the knowledge of faith requires and implies, as its transcendental condition, a natural knowledge of God, a knowledge proper to man, which remains implicit most often, but which is susceptible of rational explicitation."[73]

Could Brunner admit this? Despite his castigation of a sinful autonomy of human reason, which places itself in the place of God, i.e., the arrogant and self-sufficient reason of rationalism,[74] he also insists that God's revelation must be received by our reason, that "the Word of God is *logos*, meaning, that is to be understood by us, i.e., to be received as an object of thought, and therefore not produced by our thinking but received."[75] "Our *nous* is, therefore, the container, but not the source, of the Word of God."[76] "Assuredly, revelation and faith do not take place outside of the [faculty of] thought (*ausserhalb des Denkens*), but in the [faculty of] thought (*am Denken*), and of this work of God in our [faculty of] thought (*an unserem Denken*) our thought can bear witness."[77] "Therefore, faith does not, as it were, withdraw reason from circulation, but through faith the Word of God takes man's reason into its service. Rational thought is not disposed of—for

[73]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 138.

[74]Brunner, *Der Mensch im Widerspruch*, 246.

[75]Brunner, *Der Mensch im Widerspruch*, 246.

[76]Brunner, *Der Mensch im Widerspruch*, 246.

[77]Emil Brunner, *Gott und Mensch* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1930), 22-23 (author's own translation).

faith itself is the genuine rational thought about God and about life as a whole—but only the misuse of thought, the delusion of reason. Reason is not destroyed by faith but liberated."[78]

Thus, for Brunner, in faith reason abdicates a sinful autonomy by which it shuts itself up within itself and thus closes itself off from the truth God seeks to give it. This abdication is penance (*Busse*), which itself only takes place through an act of reason in which reason relinquishes its false autonomy. Sinful reason can only accomplish this "because it is overpowered by the Word of God; but this overpowering occurs in an act of reason, in a *meta-noia*, a change of thinking (*Umdenken*) concerning ourselves and God, in an *understanding* of that which God says to us. The 'I' expresses this because it is forced to do so by the truth of the Word of God."[79]

Brunner, therefore, would seem to be able to agree with the Catholic theologian when he writes:

> Certainly, the subject who receives the revelation opens himself to a truth which is grace, and which does not come from him; but it is *he* who opens himself to this truth and recognizes it as such. The autonomy of the *Cogito* changes itself into receptivity; but it is it which converts itself, and it does not dissolve in the act which issues from it. That which is abolished is a certain determination of the empirical 'I', which shuts itself to the revelation at first, but not the autonomy of the *Cogito*, understood as the originating 'I' or as the transcendental subject.[80]

For Brunner, too, it would seem to be true that "the conscience remains judge of all truth, even when it bows before the last instance, which is the authority of the divine revelation."[81]

When Brunner says that in faith in the revelation "the autonomy

[78]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 424.

[79]Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 426.

[80]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 139.

[81]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 139.

of the *Cogito, ergo sum* is abolished, the last instance of truth is no longer the 'I', but the divine 'Thou',"[82] he means the false autonomy resulting from sin which refuses a priori to even consider the claims of any truth that comes from outside itself, because sinful man "wants to be God Himself," and "will suffer no other God except the one who is identical with the deepest ground of the 'I'."[83] But it does not appear that he would deny that it is the liberated reason of man which recognizes that God's truth is *the* truth.

If this is true, it would appear to be logically difficult for Brunner to deny the reality which Catholic theology calls the natural knowledge of God implied in the knowledge of faith. He should be able to recognize that "with the Christian himself in whom it terminates, the knowledge of God by His manifestation in creatures possesses a properly rational character; that even if its accomplishment has been instigated from the exterior, *il est porté par une genèse rationnelle autonome*, and that this defines, in the eyes of man, the truth of this knowledge."[84] This would seem to be implied in Brunner's teaching that "If it happens that the inner eye of man is truly enlightened by the Word of God, then it is also enlightened to perceive the divine revelation in creation as it is,"[85] especially since the enlightenment comes to remove the sinful effects which make the inner eye of man an unfaithful mirror of the revelation in creation.[86]

Actually, it is very difficult for Brunner to maintain a mediating position between Barth and Catholic theology. Once he has admitted an objective revelation in creation to which corresponds in man a subjective capacity to know it, and once he adds to this that despite

[82]Brunner, *Dogmatik* I, 132.

[83]Brunner, *Dogmatik* I, 133.

[84]Bouillard, *Karl Barth* III, 138.

[85]Brunner, *Dogmatik* II, 29.

[86]Brunner, *Dogmatik* II, 28; idem, *Offenbarung und Vernunft*, 425-426.

sin man actually knows enough about God to make his idolatry inexcusable, i.e., to make him responsible, it would seem that he has already admitted with Saint Paul the possibility and the actuality of a natural knowledge of God. When he denies that this is a true and valid knowledge of God, the reader can only ask: How can a knowledge which makes man inexcusable not be a true and valid knowledge? Perhaps it is not an adequate knowledge of God's Name, for it is true that this is only given in the historical revelation in Jesus Christ. Certainly, it is not a saving knowledge which removes sin and brings communion with God, for that too can only be given, after man's fall, by the revelation in Jesus Christ. But if the knowledge makes man inexcusable for his sin, it must be true.