THE UNNATURALNESS OF NATURAL THEOLOGY: 
THE WITNESS OF RODNEY HOLDER’S KARL BARTH

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INTRODUCTION

Compared to the colourful polemics of previous centuries one could be 
forgiven for reading much recent theology as a little anaemic and even 
lifeless, perhaps an eminently bourgeois game involving intellectual postu-
turing. What such a polemical mood lacks in modesty, however (and in 
itself this is no insignificant loss but one characterising something amiss 
at both the scholarly and the theological levels), it gains in passionate 
commitment to a task. In other words, there is something worth arguing 
about, and therefore arguments and perspectives matter in some way or 
other. Why they matter is itself a significant question, and various ideol-
ogy critics indicate that more is going on than might at first meet the eye. 
What is happening when Karl Barth announces a plague on the houses of 
the natural theologians, and accuses the analogy entis of being “the inven-
tion of the anti-Christ”?2

If nothing else, the reader will sit up and take notice that Barth thinks 
something theologically crucial is at stake, and that it is something worth 
fighting over. Yet like the polemicists of old, has Barth not substituted as-
sertion and ridicule for analysis and argument, a loud voice for persuasive 
reasons? If so, then what does this reveal about his theological approach? 
Ever since his vituperative response to Emil Brunner in 1934, expressed by 
the memorable title Nein!, the Swiss theologian’s critique of natural theology 
has been the subject of much spilled ink, weeping and gnashing of teeth, and 
even in some cases the fracturing of friendships (Barth’s own “friendship,” 
which was actually a very fragile one, with Brunner is often cited as a case in 
point). The consensus of one particular line of criticism is that this is both 
how not to treat one’s friends and an expression of Barth’s inability to mean-
ingfully engage theologically with a wider audience.

1 This essay reviews Rodney Holder, The Heavens Declare: Natural Theology and the Legacy of 
2 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T 
Clark, 2004), I.1 (hereafter CD), xiii.
In 2001 Rodney Holder published a paper which largely restated a common understanding of Barth’s critique of natural theology in the English-speaking, empiricistically-influenced theological context. In this understanding, Barth is a problematic conversation-partner for any theologian engaged, for example, in apologetics or dialogue with the natural sciences and non-Christian religious traditions. Potentially Holder’s *The Heavens Declare* could, and should, perform a valuable service in identifying, clarifying, and repairing the apparent problems with Barth’s critical account. While the commendations by Sarah Coakley and Roger Trigg whet the reader’s appetite, there are significant difficulties with Holder’s book. On the one hand, it has the feel of a textbook that is eminently readable; the prose is lucid and the transitions in its ideas and arguments can be followed readily. On the other hand, it rarely penetrates sufficiently deeply in its erudition and analysis. As will be argued later, the book does not quite realise its potential since its account seldom develops the material claims of Holder’s earlier article, or repairs its contestable material.

*The Heavens Declare* is not focused exclusively on Barth, but discusses him prior to treating his legacy in an influential strand of theology, developed by Bonhoeffer (ch. 3), Pannenberg (ch. 4), Torrance (ch. 5), and McGrath (ch. 6). Pannenberg is a strange roommate here, since the very philosophical shape of his theological imagination differs considerably from that of Barth, Bonhoeffer and Torrance, for example. Because natural theology is deeply contested by Barth and many who have learned from him, it is understandable that Holder devotes his attention to assessing this critique; yet, it might be urged that at some point the book could offer a substantive account of what a healthy natural theology might look like. In fact, this would immeasurably strengthen the book, which tends to depend too much on throw-away comments such as, “I believe we can get limited knowledge of the Creator from the creation, and it is important we can do so because then the nonbeliever has access to some, albeit limited, knowledge of God.” What is the force here of the “I believe,” especially when Holder is arguing for the role of reason in natural theology? How is this limited knowledge obtained, especially when many philosophers doubt that a reasonable case

3 Rodney Holder, “Karl Barth and the Legitimacy of Natural Theology,” *Themelios* 26, no.3 (2001): 22–37. The critique entertained has been offered by, among many others, Brand Blanshard, Gordon Clark, Clark Pinnock, and James Barr. In fact, Holder draws heavily on Barr’s reading of Barth.
4 Holder, *The Heavens Declare*.
5 Holder, *The Heavens Declare*, 76.
can be made from "nature"? The occasional mention of Swinburne and his probabilistic case for God's existence does offer some suggestions as to what the book has in mind.

**Reason's Threefold Concern**

Part of the problem with critical readings of Barth's critique of natural theology is that they rarely define what they mean by "natural theology." As several studies have shown, the term itself is used in various ways. Holder opens with the claim that: "Natural theology is generally understood to concern the knowledge of God available to all human beings without recourse to special revelation." It is what is meant here by "recourse" that is at issue with Barth, since his work on the question of "possibility" is suggestive of what a Barthian influenced style of *remoto Christo* might look like. Three main concerns animating the book suggest what Holder is doing with the topic.

Holder's first concern is with apologetics in order to offer options for the persuasive communication of the Gospel. The book's preface mentions an effort to seek "evidence for God's existence in the ordered structure of the world." This, however, is in many ways a very Anglophone rational project (and to an extent even more particularly and simply English or English-American), and not so much one characteristic of German Idealism. The project fails, moreover, to draw contextual distinctions between periods of intellectual history.

Recognising the shape of Holder's empiricistic-evidentialist account of reason and what it can do is vital. First, he does not problematise his evidentialism. In other words, he neither asks whether it is philosophically appropriate nor explicates ways in which it may or may not be properly relevant for theological matters. Holder should not be expected to justify his perspective on reason, since critical engagement with the material would be too much delayed if prefaced by talk of the rational conditions for its possibility. Nonetheless, he might show more scholarly caution and sophisticated philosophical engagement with Barth if he were to address the rational differences more clearly.

Secondly, as with many other broadly empiricist critics of Barth, Holder does not pay sufficient attention to the fact that Enlightenment reason was,

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8 Holder, *The Heavens Declare*, ix.
and remains, pluriform as a consequence of the different contexts from
which it emerged. In many ways, Barth belonged to a quite different En-
luminement from that of John Locke and Richard Swinburne, and while he
did reflect on “realist” traditions of reasoning his theological imagination
was both informed by, and reshaped in response to, the Idealism of thinkers
such as Immanuel Kant and G.W.H. Hegel, as well as by Friedrich Schleier-
macher’s theological repair of features of Kant’s intellectual work. Holder’s
text mentions having been “heavily influenced by ... Richard Swinburne”
which is fair enough, except that it fails to recognise the hermeneutical is-
sues involved in applying such a perspective to Barth.9

Further, and this also is no small matter, Holder does not indicate what
he means by conversation between Christians and non-Christians. He men-
tions learning from others, but much of what he has in mind actually in-
volves arguing in order to persuade others of the rationality of theologi-
cal claims. So he worries that Barth’s account denies resources to “convince
the outsider.”10 “Barth’s approach leads ultimately to an irrationalism that
deprees Christians of an important means of commending the faith in a
pluralist society.”11 Rather than dealing in generalities, Holder needs to be
more specific about what makes this conversation work. He assumes that
“reason” grounds the practice of conversation, but while there are multiple
versions of “reason” Holder presupposes the legitimacy of one particular
version without either indicating its contestability or problematising his ac-
count of rationality. The failure to do full justice to the pluralistic character
of contemporary accounts of rationality, to an uncharitable critic, smacks
of a form of intellectual imperialism, but one masked as rational because it
does not draw attention to its own relativity.

A perspective that emerges from, among others, the work of Hans-
Georg Gadamer identifies forms of tradition-based reflection as one
important indication of difficulties with certain types of appeal to “rea-
son,” and thus of shifts in understanding what is involved in conversation
and argument. This does not necessarily constitute a loss of reason, but
rather expresses reason’s contexts that have to be taken seriously in any
good account of what reason is and does. There is no criterion for rational
judgment that is not indissolubly bound to a particular form of rational
life-setting, and while traditions are not static entities they cannot be sus-
pended in the judgments conducted. In this regard, it might be instructive

9 Citation from Holder, The Heavens Declare, x.
10 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 49.
11 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 15.
to consider what occurs in John Wisdom's rational thought-experiment involving the parable of the "invisible gardener." While I do not intend at this point to defend a tradition-based account of rationality, I note it not only as something that the book avoids, but also as something the avoidance of which distinctly weakens Holder's critical account of Barth. In fact, if this alternative account of rationality, conversation and argument is meaningful, then it could subvert the very grounds upon which The Heavens Declare makes its appeal to rationality.

Thirdly, the Enlightenment is not merely a new provision of rational arguments that can support claims to revelation, but involves crucial shifts in self-understanding and radically reorders epistemic subjectivity. John Webster, for instance, argues that even the very function of "revelation" shifts as a result. Yet Holder's Anselm and Thomas sound like eighteenth century empiricists, and the intensive debates involved in attempting to understand their accounts of theological reason are rather too neatly elided. The most he recognises is that "With the rise of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, natural theology started to take a different form, appealing to particular structures within the natural order, rather than order per se, as exhibiting the signs of design." Holder's concern here is that this development led "to the neglect of revelation, since this seemed to point only to the need for a deistic conception of God ... particularly as the universe came to be seen as a clockwork mechanism."

The book's second main concern is with the possibility of fruitful conversation between natural scientists and theologians. He wants to indicate not only that conversations between these two intellectual specialisations do indeed occur, but also that there are good and persuasive reasons for them. "[N]atural theology is surely vital for the science-faith dialogue, and for the task of countering the arguments of the 'new atheism'"

Holder's third concern is to do justice to the biblical witness of texts such as Ps 19:1, Rom 1:19-20 and Acts 14:17. His frequent references to "Evangelicals" indicates the audience he has largely in mind (his article of 2001 was published in the Evangelical journal Themelios), and for this reason

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13 See John Webster, Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11–17.
14 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 4.
15 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 4–5.
16 This is an appropriate and necessary set of conversations given Holder's location in the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge's St. Edmund's College.
17 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 13.

John C. McDowell, The Unnaturalness of Natural Theology: The Witness of Rodney Holder's Karl Barth
the scriptural witness is not far from the surface of the text. What Holder wants to speak of at this point is “general revelation,” emphasising that “natural knowing” is itself an act of God’s revelation, of God being known through God. Barth was right, according to Holder, that God’s Self-revelation in Christ as attested in Scripture is primary, but was wrong to deny the message of Acts 14:17, Rom 1:19 and Ps 19:1. “It would seem there is an inherent contradiction in Barth’s position here. God’s self-revelation in Scripture is all that matters, yet Scripture itself attests that there is a knowledge of God to be obtained from observing nature.”18 Actually, Holder’s claim about “contradiction” is misleading; the issue is not that Barth contradicted himself (claimed the authority of the witness of Scripture, but refused to acknowledge its witness to natural theology) but rather that Barth has mistakenly read those passages as not supporting a natural theology. In other words, it is not a matter of authority but of interpretation; Barth should be accused of eisegesis, distorting the text because of his theological presuppositions.

Barth is understood to fail badly with respect to all three of Holder’s critical concerns. Even so, it is refreshing to hear someone writing for an Evangelical audience speak appreciatively of Barth, since this differs considerably from much Evangelical reception of Barth which has frequently been indebted to the uncharitable polemic of Cornelius Van Til. Corresponding to the three aims of the book outlined above, Holder maintains firstly that “Barth’s approach isolates theology from rational scrutiny”;19 secondly, that Barth’s work militates against fruitful forms of engagement with natural scientists; and, thirdly, that Barth’s reading of Rom 1 subverts the witness of the text.

But is it Barth?

Given the popularity and longevity of this reading of Barth it might seem perverse to contest it. But there are numerous omissions in Holder’s critique. So much so, that the most basic question is: “but is Holder’s Barth Barth?”

Holder misses, for example, the way Barth fruitfully engages with theologians with whom he did not agree (most notably Schleiermacher) for purposes other than contest and conquest. Barth also converses positively with a range of non-theologically-specialised work that helps him in the task of theologically repairing his own tradition. Barth’s self-critical use of “dead dogs,” Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Franz Overbeck, Ludwig Feuerbach, or even the “little lights of creation” all suggest that Holder’s is a complacent.

18 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 44; also “Karl Barth and the Legitimacy of Natural Theology,” 34.
19 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 46.
reading. Put simply, Barth does indeed learn from others how to do theology better than he might otherwise do it.

In that regard, Holder’s judgment is problematic: “Barth denies the believer any external means of correcting faith—for example, a naïve belief in the creation of the world in a literal six days should be abandoned on the basis of modern science.” Of course, one can and should observe that much of Barth’s work is full of assertion rather than argument, but one has only to consult the small print sections in his Church Dogmatics to observe substantive argumentation quite different in form from lengthy recitation. Here, for instance, Barth engages in exegetical work that draws on debates among biblical scholars, work that provides supportive and even grounding possibilities for his theological account. Moreover, in his lecture cycle published as Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century, one would do well to attend to the charitable readings of thinkers Barth was otherwise, and in other places, deeply theologically contesting in many ways. Furthermore, as Stanley Hauerwas recognises, “as Barth sees it, the language of the church is already an argument just to the extent that his descriptions and redescriptions cannot help but challenge our normal way of seeing the world.”

So Barth does learn non-trivially from others in practice, and he does affirm the witness to God in and through all things. A certain kind of account that is wary of his critique of natural theology needs to be considerably more careful in its claims about his work.

Penetrating Deeper into Barth

How far does this practice in Barth call into question Holder’s thesis? For instance, if these are examples of practices inconsistent with Barth’s theological account then the most that is at stake would be the quality of Holder’s

20 “God may speak to us through Russian communism, through a flute concerto, through a blossoming shrub or through a dead dog.” (CD, I.1, 60–61).
21 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 23. A moment is needed to tackle the example Holder offers in this instance, the reading of Gen 1 in CD III.1. Barth does not read the text historically, in other words as referring to historically specifiable information regarding the creation of the world. The category he develops, that of “saga,” for this type of text might sound odd to many readers but its function is to maintain both that creation is an act of God (hence, not read well through the category of “myth” as Barth understands it) while also speaking of pre-history (rather than “history”). True, Barth does not appear to receive this hermeneutical perspective from outside the text, but rather from the text itself and in a contextual reading of it. It would be very odd for Holder to ask that a good reading of scripture be directed in the first place from learning that takes place from outside the text, and subsequently applied onto it.
scholarship and his attentiveness to Barth’s work. On the other hand, if these are practices well grounded in, and expressive of, Barth’s very theological commitments then something considerable is at issue with Holder’s reading.

This is where it is important to recognise Barth’s theological appeal to the multiple means through which revelation takes place in the revealedness of the Spirit. Holder does not mention CD IV.3.1 on the “little lights of creation,” for example. Specifically with regard, then, to the issue of “natural theology,” Barth not insignificantly admits that if Gottlieb Söhngen’s reading of natural theology is the Roman Catholic one then Barth would happily withdraw his earlier criticism of it being “the invention of the anti-Christ” (CD, II.1, 82). One could argue that this feature of Barth’s work is underdetermined, and indicate that this lack constitutes a real theological problem—but what one cannot claim is that Barth does not allow for the witness to God through the creature’s creatureliness. The latter claim is simply a mistake in that it does not attend to a thorough exegesis of Barth’s writings. In order to contest Holder adequately, it would be imperative to confront the formidable challenge of indicating that there is genuine argumentation “in public,” and not simply a clash of competing perspectives (which at its root is nihilistic) attempting to out-narrate each other with whatever form of power is available to conduct the “persuasion.”

Holder’s critical reading focuses on Barth’s solas—in particular, the sola fide (which apparently precludes reason); solus Christus (which apparently denies “general revelation”); sola gratia (which apparently undermines human participation). The two broad questions Holder presses on Barth are: how can he “test the spirits”? how can he “convince the outsider”? “The only way is surely by appeal to reason. Yet this is precisely the path which Barth denies to us.” Even here, however, Holder sees a contradiction in Barth’s practice: “Barth says that we must rely only on revelation, and not on human reason, yet of course his own arguments are a product of human reasoning.”

It is no small matter that this reading depends on a contrast of faith/revelation and reason. The theologian’s task, however, is to muddy the clear oppositions that have become all too familiar—like faith/reason; argument/depiction-description. Barth’s theological narrative is itself an argument,

23 For an academic that is no little matter in itself, and for an Evangelical theologian there are in addition issues of charitable attentiveness, respect for the material, justice and fairness.
24 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 49.
26 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 47, citing Roger Trigg.
describing how things look from where he is situated, involving exegesis not merely of the biblical materials and Christian theologians but of all things (and, potentially, of all people), and inviting counter-descriptions. This means that for Barth reason is not separated from faith, a disjunction that would not make sense of: first, his account of theology as critical reflection on the church’s proclamation; secondly, his arguments against opposing readings; finally, his readings of philosophical thinkers in his lecture cycle on the nineteenth century, for instance.

Crucially, the book’s all too brief mention of Barth’s Anselm does not refer to the rationality of faith, of the participation of the ratio in the Ratio. Instead, Holder merely says that Barth’s “theology starts from a prior commitment.”27 Yet from his mid-1920s Göttingen lectures Barth begins to express a version of theological rationality that has become famous particularly because of this Anselmbuch. Without either defining this exposition from a general conception of “science,” or a priori ruling out the possibility of overlaps between theological and other types of Wissenschaft (and this is important), Barth intends for theological rationality to take its rise from, and be wholly determined by, the nature of the object that is given to be known. Since God is not an “object” in the sense that things are objects, theological rationality remains relatively independent from these other forms of rationality.28

It is vital to notice, then, that Barth does not, therefore, begin with and expound “faith,” even the content of “faith,” as would “fideism” and “subjectivism.”29 Theology becomes, if it is to be “scientific” and rational, a faithful and obedient Nachdenken (literally, “after thinking”). In other words, it has to be a thankful, realistic, and a posteriori reflection upon and explication of the divine object of faith’s speaking, and that, of course for Barth, is in and through Christ.30 This move Barth famously articulates through the Anselmian slogans, fides quaerens intellectum (faith seeking understanding) and credo ut intelligam (I believe to understand), later arguing, with respect to the former, that this is: “What distinguishes faith

27 Holder, The Heavens Declare, 16.
28 See, e.g., CD I.1, 3, 5, 10–11.
Such a process, for Barth, could never be irrational since it is rather the proper location of a well-functioning reason. This is why Trigg’s accusation misses the mark: “Barth says we must rely only on revelation, and not on human reason, yet of course his own arguments are a product of human reasoning.”

Barth is not opposing all theo-anthropological procedures, as Wolfhart Pannenberg, for example, supposes in classifying Barth as the preeminent modern exponent of “the christological procedure ‘from above to below.’” Later talk of a properly pneumatologically-grounded anthropology, has been preceded by Barth’s christologically-determined anthropology. His objection is to a theology that attempts to stand anywhere but under the hearing of the Deus dixit (God’s speaking). This, Barth believes, is precisely what Schleiermacher’s theology of “man’s religious consciousness,” and Cartesianism’s cogito do. Without challenging Feuerbach’s materialist and atheistic humanism, Barth holds out Feuerbach’s theological non-realism as a diagnosis of the fatal malaise affecting theology on the way of Schleiermacher. For example, the nineteenth century Ritschlians, Barth argues, constructed a ramp “so that one may easily (‘casually’) climb to the top, that is, to revelation.” Feuerbach, however, indicated that the anthropocentrically-conceived god of post-Cartesianism is the idolatrous positing of “myself as the subject,” “a voice ... from this unredeemed world,” a creation of a “God for himself after his own image,” and therefore a failure to hear the divine speech. Barth’s 1922 treatment of religion as the expression of the sinful human mind, as a factory of idols, therefore emphatically endures into CD, I.2.

Barth identifies a similar procedure of control operating in the analogia entis’ premature objectivisation of God, with its postulation of a common

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36 See CD, III.1, 314. For Barth, the test case is christology, and Christ fits badly into Schleiermacher’s theology of the “composite life.”
37 E.g., CD, I.2, 290.
38 Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 61.
39 Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 48; 92; CD, I.2, 6.
being shared by God and creation alike, and the subsequently possible human epistemic movement to the divine “It.” Such moves fall under Barth’s general condemnation of “natural theology,” by which he intends all forms of theology that do not begin exclusively from the known Ratio of God.40 Natural theology, in both its epistemically Pelagian (human discovery of God) and Semi-Pelagian (human discovery of God aided by grace) forms, operates as a “good and useful narthex or first stage on the way to the true Christian revelation,” gained quite apart from that revelation.41 All natural theologies (note, not theological accounts of “general revelation” or the revealedness of God through multiple means) “begin their journey with their backs turned towards God and, with all brilliance and ingenuity, end at a deity who cannot be the God of Christian grace whom they seek.”42

Revelation, in Barth’s account, then, reorders reason towards its proper end, and in that event one comes to be potentially able to describe how all things look from where one is situated, and therein invite the argument of counter-descriptions. In other words, Barth’s dogmatic description provides a hermeneutic, a pair of spectacles through which to enable well-ordered sight. That is why Barth stresses sin as a disordering of sight, a blinding of the sinner to the witness to God in all things. Consequently, Barth emphasises that, for instance, Paul in Rom 1, immediately after claiming creation’s expression of God’s “invisible qualities” on the basis of his Hebraic faith in the creative God of Israel, asserts the exchanging of “the truth of God for a lie,” the lie of idolatry, a sinfulness and ignorance of the true God that appears to deepen in intensity to the Pauline mind as the letter continues (Rom 1:20, 24). For his part, Calvin likewise follows his particular reflections on the sensus divinitatis in the knowledge of God the Creator with an admission that the human mind is a factory of idols. Hence, for Barth, the event of the cross, so powerful an image in the second edition of the Romans commentary of 1922, stands as an iconoclastic exposure of human being as existing in a state of sinful rebellion from

40 See CD, I.1, 36, 219. While Barth does utilise Kant’s metaphysics-critique, he theologically rejects an a priori philosophical agnosticism as a negative natural theology (see CD, I.2, 29f.; 244-45; II.1, 183).
41 Barth, Göttingen Dogmatics, 91; cf. CD, I.1, 385; II.1, 86-88, 231.

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God. At Golgotha, Barth declares starkly, "Man unveils himself here as really and finally guilty ... by killing God." Hence, "it is monstrous to describe the uniqueness of God as an object of 'natural knowledge.'"

Criticising Barth's christology as straightforwardly exclusivist is a mistake. True, he does indeed propose christology to be the sole and regulative location of the objectivity of divine being and speaking. "God is free for us at this point, and not elsewhere." This, Barth claims, is "the narrow isolation" of the revelation-event, for it is in Christ alone that God reveals God's self. Yet when he speaks of 'revelation' the Swiss theologian means the eternal Word's revealing of God's Self in and through the humanity of Jesus, and therefore when he speaks of this using exclusivist language of revelation he does not deny, but on the contrary affirms, that this One is revealed through the scriptures, church proclamation, or (to use later language) "the little lights of creation." In other words, the content of Revelation is God in God's Word, but the means of the Revealedness by the Spirit cannot be controlled or specified in advance (hence the claim about the "dead dog"). As Barth claims in his Evangelical Theology lectures among other places: "The central affirmations of the Bible are not self-evident. ... Every possible means must be used ... not the least, the enlistment of every device of the conjectural imagination" in order to interpret it. Barth's theology is, crucially, one that enacts its own sense of fragility, provisionality, and revisability.

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43 In one famous critique of the classical arguments for the existence of God, Paul Tillich claims they deny divine transcendence. To say that "God exists" is to place God on the same level as creatures. God thereby become a "being" like all other existing "beings" rather than the "ground of being" (see Systematic Theology, vol. 1 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951], 235–38). Subsequent thinkers (and Hume earlier) have demonstrated not only the ambiguity of the universe, but also the varying ways that its story can be told depending on the network of beliefs formative of and available to the storyteller's imagination. John Wisdom's parable of the "invisible gardener," used to anti-theist effect by Anthony Flew, could be an interesting observation on this. Even Barth recognises this ambiguity when he declares that the means through which God reveals God's self "can also not serve it [viz. revelation]; it can even hinder and prevent it. The very thing can fail to happen which, because this form is given, ought to happen. The direct opposite can even happen.... God Himself can be rejected in the grace of His condescension to the creature" (CD, II.1, 55–56).

44 CD, I.2, 92.


46 CD, I.2, 29.


48 See Barth, Evangelical Theology, 37–38.
CONCLUSION: THE ELEPHANT MEETS THE WHALE

Book review articles are normally reserved for highly significant books in the field. The reason for selecting Holder’s book is slightly different. It is a very succinct and readable summary of a common reading of Barth offered particularly by Anglophone critics. While over recent decades, when an intensification of sophisticated Barth commentary has emerged, this reading has been offered relatively less vocally, it has resurfaced quite recently in several studies.

My review has no particular investment in defending Barth theologically as such, but is concerned rather with interrogating the quality and appropriateness of Holder’s scholarship and his reading of the Swiss’ perspective. I hope that my critique does not sound uncharitable, especially since I very much appreciate the clarity of the book’s style; its constructive and theologically generous refusal to demonise Barth; its efforts to put an important issue back into theological consciousness; and its ability to even-temperedly represent some longstanding criticisms from the “borderlands” of Barth’s apparently hermetically sealed theological account. Certainly one should admit that Barth’s claims will not satisfy empiricistic-evidentialist modes of reasoning and the type of apologetic forms of “conversation” they demand. But this observation suggests that the issues are considerably bigger and broader than those that would permit a simple application of one exclusivist rational schema to Barth and thereafter accuse him of irrationality, subjectivism and obscurantism. Critics of Barth’s negation of natural theology, therefore, need to engage in the kind of careful analysis that does not make the noises of the elephant against the whale!

49 See, e.g., Holder, “Karl Barth and the Legitimacy of Natural Theology”, 24.

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