

T.L. SMITH, *NATURAL THEOLOGY. THE DIALECTIC OF NATURAL THEOLOGY: EMIL BRUNNER AND KARL BARTH ON NATURE AND GRACE*. SAARBRÜCKEN: VDM VERLAG, 2010. [ISBN: 978-3-639-23182-3]

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Research projects are increasingly limited in scope and somewhat conservative by nature in consequence. T.L. Smith, however, opens with a startling claim to the project's grand design: "The following text will investigate the work of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner on natural theology, researching four hundred years of dialectical tension between natural and revealed religion to propose a new scientific discipline, a discipline informed by the past and present." (p. 9) This is not so much daunting in the task it has set itself, but quite frightening in its over-ambition, although having 356 pages of text to play with does offer some hope that the stew will not be watery in its substance.

Since only one major study of Barth's engagement with Brunner has appeared recently in English there is plenty of potential for Smith's text to be usefully instructive. The reason for the lack until that point had largely been the fact that much English language reception of Barth had been determined by Brunner's perspective in their print conflict of 1934. In 2001, however, John W. Hart made ample use of the recently collected correspondence between the two Reformed theologians that illuminated their relations in ways not previously understood apart from a handful of earlier references to each other, and the polemical publications of the year that Hitler assumed full control and the Barmen Declaration was composed. It is in fleshing out the broader context of the controversy in terms of the exchanges that Barth and Brunner had been engaged in since 1916, and in particular in assessing their relationship through their correspondence, that Hart has provided a useful service. These are materials that, when read well, could provide the reassessment of this controversy that numerous Barth-scholars have for a few years now been suggesting is badly needed. The book's main merit lies in challenging the 'political reading' of the dispute, the kind of reading that takes one of two routes: that the spirit of the age (1) made Barth see demons where there were none; or (2) made him imagine they were larger and more dangerous than they really were. After all, one should recall, late in his life Barth reflected on how he would have handled the matter very differently had it occurred in the 1960s.

Hart's second main value resides in recognising that there were *real* issues at stake. For too long numerous British and N. American readers have taken uncritically Brunner's claim that there was no difference except in Barth's mind, only to miss Brunner's subsequent slippage into asserting that *there is a difference at the semantic level*, and final slippage into admitting that *there is a difference at the material level*, only that Barth should have agreed with Brunner. Importantly Hart acknowledges and details Barth's charge that Brunner had allowed a space to open up that was untouched by sin, and unread trinitarianly, that operates by way of a *preparation* for the reception of grace. Despite Brunner's claim to the contrary, his *negative* natural

theology was no less a *natural theology* than was a *positive* natural theology. More detailing here on Barth's move against Kant would be instructive, as well as subvert readings that continue to insist that Barth's rejection of natural theology was Kantianly performed. Brunner was more Kantian than Barth here, and that debate with post-Kantian 'modernity' is highly significant to notice in reading the latter.

Smith, on the other hand, provides an attempt to locate Barth and Brunner in the "very cultural developments giving rise to Schleiermacher, the Pietists, and the orthodox confessions in their attempt to preserve revelation over and against natural religion that had marked German Protestant theology since the late seventeenth century." [p. 31] Smith does acknowledge that Barth's critique of natural theology was the culmination of tensions resulting from Kant's work (p. 13), but insufficiently presses this point home in any detail. It is in directing the reader to this longer-term contextualisation that the book has value: "Barth's *Nein!* was not simply a rejection of natural theology but a rejection of what Karl Barth perceived as three hundred years of Protestant and Catholic theological developments emphasizing natural religion over revelation" (p. 24).

Nevertheless, this is a deeply problematic study on several levels. An adequate sophistication of reading is frequently missing. Is it really the case that reason came to dominate religion in the Enlightenment as Smith suggests (p. 33), or rather that reason took a different path from that of the teleological reasoning of theological contexts and in its light religion came to take on a different form?

Secondly, the presentation of the issues is generally unclear. For instance, it is not always clear what Smith means by 'natural theology'. In his introduction he slips into talk of 'natural religion', and mentions the development of modern arguments for the existence of God from nature. This is one kind of natural theology certainly, but is it really the pre-eminent one Barth's critique is concerned with? After all, Brunner is not concerned to utilise the so-called cosmological, teleological or moral arguments for God's existence, and this suggests that something different is going on in Barth's critique. (In fact, Brunner makes clear that his "capacity for revelation" is not itself a positive *natural theology* at all, but only the conditions for suggesting that apologetic proclamation can take place to those who have not yet encountered the Self-revealing God. Moreover, the controversy between Barth and Brunner is *not* about natural and revealed religion at all, since both argued that the knowledge of God is revealed and only revealed—for Brunner the "capacity" does not provide material *content* to any claims about the knowing of God, but simply provides the *formal* "point" for God's contact and a contact that can enable *eristics* to function. Smith simply makes a mistake, and a pretty fundamental one at that, in regarding Brunner as a fruitful conversant in developing a positive natural theology for today.) The introduction also speaks of a contemporary distinction often made between natural theology and a theology of nature (the latter Smith still thinks is a methodological matter), and claims that "Barth's criticism applies to all theology related to nature" (p. 16). That Smith thereafter immediately refers to "the early Barth" would suggest at the very least that the book would have to attend carefully the matter of a *shift* having occurred in Barth's work in order to enable him to write *CD* III. While this would be a difficult argument to maintain, it would at least be a meaningful one. However, the study does not address the issue. At the most, this might signal a confusion of understanding what 'natural theology' means in the

hands of Barth, the deistic inspired arguments or proofs being but one of several forms. That this has taken place is suggested by Smith's question about "what justification can there be for natural theology or any dialogue between science and religion after ... Karl Barth's denial of natural theology?" (p. 20).

Moreover, Smith elides careful and lucid specificity in handling terms and concepts. He claims that "Karl Barth identified the anthropological basis for Protestant theology in Gogarten to be no different from the natural theology that developed in both Roman Catholicism and neo-Protestantism" (p. 17). Barth, in contrast, recognised that there were real differences between neo-Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, and he never charged Brunner's theology with being identical to these. It is instead more adequate to say that *at the root* of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the *analogia entis* and neo-Protestant subjectivity Barth recognised a similar problem. In other words, his criticisms of Gogarten, Bultmann, Przywara, and Brunner are more criticisms of a family resemblance. (Smith problematically misses the significance of Barth's engagement with Przywara in the late 1920s, and this conversation with Roman Catholicism is distinctly missing from Smith's attention to Protestant modernity.)

Finally, the adequacy of Smith's reading of Barth, for example, is highly contestable. On page 34 Smith claims that "Karl Barth's reaction to this dialectic [of reason and revelation] would swing the pendulum to the ... extreme position of revelation alone entirely independent of natural theology." Certainly this has been a common reading of Barth, but it is a difficult one to sustain when one considers, for instance, that the human *ratio* is what it is and is purified when it thinks after the divine *Ratio*; that Barth describes theology as *Wissenschaftlich* and as *critical reflection* on church proclamation; and that he leaves open the possibility of recognising (which involves making reasoned judgments on) "parables of the kingdom"; all of which is hardly something he could do if he was advocating "revelation alone". This claim adds further to the confusion over how Smith understands 'natural theology' since he here associates it with 'reason', as such, and that is certainly not how the term functions in Barth's critical theology.

Two gripes about formal matters—firstly, having italicised *and* underlined sentences appears a little odd, and untidily distracting. Secondly, an abundance of typographical mistakes suggests the manuscript was insufficiently proof read.

The introduction promises that "A follow on work will develop the contribution of Emil Brunner and the later Karl Barth for natural theology in Dogmatics" (p. 24). One can only hope that that is considerably more carefully conceived and executed than this confused and confusing text.