

Biblical Faith and Natural Theology

J. Barr

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RÉSUMÉ

Un aspect des ouvrages publiés par James Barr est son opposition constante au 'biblicisme', c'est à dire à une approche de la théologie que l'on prétend biblique, mais où il ne veut voir qu'un a priori. Un autre trait constant de cet auteur, c'est son désaveu, à la fois de la position évangélique traditionnelle, et du barthisme. Dans le présent volume, basé sur les conférences de Gifford de 1991, il s'oppose à l'idée que la théologie naturelle serait absente de la Bible: il considère cette idée comme un autre exemple de dogmatisme théologique. Il conçoit la théologie naturelle de façon très large—ce qu'il nomme théologie naturelle ressemble fort, en fait, au sensus divinitatis de Calvin—et attaque la position de Barth qui la rejetait. Malgré une tendance à l'exagération, la thèse principale est présentée de manière convaincante.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Ein roter Faden, der sich durch das publizierte Werk von James Barr zieht, ist sein Argwohn gegenüber jeglichem Biblizismus, einem theologischen Ansatz, der vorgibt biblisch zu sein, aber in Wahrheit mit a prioris arbeitet. Ein weiterer roter Faden ist seine persönliche Loslösung vom konservativen Evangelikalismus und Barthianismus. Im vorliegenden Werk, das auf seinen „Gifford Lectures“ von 1991 basiert, vertritt Barr die These, daß die Ansicht, wonach die Bibel nirgends eine natürliche Theologie lehre bzw. sanktioniere, ein weiteres Beispiel eines theologischen Dogmatismus sei. Der Autor umreißt, sodann in groben Zügen das Konzept einer natürlichen Theologie und attackiert anschließend Barths Abneigung gegen dieselbe. Ungeachtet einer Tendenz zu Übertreibungen ist Barrs Argumentation in den entscheidenden Punkten überzeugend.

A connecting thread of James Barr's published work, from *Biblical Words for Time*, through his two critiques of fundamentalism to the present work, is his suspicion of biblicism, some approach to theology which is suppos-

edly biblical but which is in fact *a priori*. Barr has argued that the 'biblical theology' movement rests on a false semantics and fundamentalism on a kind of biblical rationalism. Too often, like a nose of wax, the Bible bears the imprint of the last theological thumb. In this present work, based on his 1991 Gifford Lectures, Barr argues that the idea that the Bible nowhere teaches nor endorses natural theology is another piece of theological dogmatism.

Another connecting thread in these writings is that they form part of a process of personal disengagement from conservative evangelicalism and Barthianism (p. 93). Barr's willingness to avow this fact gives to his writings a polemical edge which, combined with a direct unfussy style, adds considerably to their charm.

Barr construes natural theology very broadly, as the claim that 'just by being human beings, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and an awareness of him, or at least a capacity for such an awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible.' (p. 1).

Armed with this definition Professor Barr launches into an attack on Barth's disavowal of natural theology. He regards this, as well as his famous spat with Brunner, as being on the same low intellectual level. The four lectures which follow are on scriptural and Apocryphal material; on Acts 17, St. Paul and the Hebrew background, Natural Theology Within the Jewish Tradition, and Within the Old Testament. In Lecture Six Barr takes up the polemic against twentieth century Barthian theology once again, and among other things performs the admirable service of endorsing Calvin's account of the natural and of natural theology, hardly surprising given that Barr's definition of natural theology is a close relative of Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*. The remaining lectures are on more general theological themes; on religion, tradition and natural theology, on the image of God, and on biblical language. The final lecture is on the future of Biblical Theology.

In all this Barr is not advocating such natural theology (p. 103); he is content to straighten the record, and to warn against the way in which the denial of natural theology has affected biblical studies (p. 103).

The whole work is stimulating, clear, and forthright: a decidedly good read. And much of the evidence that Barr assembles carries con-

viction. St. Paul's appeal to the natural knowledge of God in Acts 17 and Romans 1 and 2 seems undeniable, and arguments to wish it away correspondingly lame. Barr provocatively claims that such natural theology has its source not in Greek but in Jewish thought (p. 51), and that features of the 'God of the Philosophers' are to be found in Scripture. All this seems to be well and convincingly argued.

Where Professor Barr is less convincing is when he presses his thesis further. For example, in a brief treatment of the prophets, he claims that they declare that God acts on the basis of the same principles as those which humans can discover by reason (p. 95). Even if this is true, this does not show that the prophets assume a natural knowledge of God in Professor Barr's sense. Or if it does, then almost anything does. The fact that the prophets reason with the covenant people no more shows that there are truths about God known, or capable of being known, by reason than the fact that the general use of, say, the subordinate clause, shows that this reveals something about God. Similar remarks could be made about his treatment of Jesus' parables (p. 190). The author seems to slide from arguing that there is a natural knowledge of God to arguing that there are truths naturally made known by God, but the latter is hardly disputable nor disputed. But this tendency to overstate things must not be allowed to detract from the importance and persuasiveness of Professor Barr's central thesis.

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Concise Dictionary of Religion **Irving Hexham**

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RÉSUMÉ

Hexham a essayé, non sans succès, de réaliser le dessein impossible de réunir un grand nombre d'informations sous une forme très concentrée. Ce dictionnaire des religions se propose de donner 'des renseignements fiables et rapidement accessibles sur des milliers de sujets ayant trait à la religion'. Outre le christianisme, le judaïsme, l'islam, le bouddhisme et l'hindouisme, qui reçoivent un traitement abon-

dant, l'ouvrage contient de nombreux articles sur les sectes, sur de nouvelles religions, ainsi que sur des traditions religieuses moins connues.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Hexham verfolgt—und realisiert auch im Großen und Ganzen—das unmögliche Ziel, ein Forschungsmittel bereitzustellen, das eine große Fülle von Informationen in äußerst konzentrierter Form darbieten soll. Das Lexikon soll einen schnellen Zugriff auf zuverlässige Informationen zu tausenden von Themen ermöglichen, die einen Bezug zur Religion aufweisen. Zusätzlich zu der ausführlichen Behandlung von Christentum, Judentum, Islam, Buddhismus und Hinduismus finden sich zahlreiche Artikel zu Sekten, neuen Religionen und weniger bekannten religiösen Traditionen.

Hexham has attempted—and largely achieved—the impossible task of providing 'a research tool which brings together a vast amount of information in a highly condensed form'. The dictionary is intended to give 'quick access to reliable information on thousands of topics related to religion. In addition to extensive coverage of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, there are numerous articles on sects, new religions and less-known religious traditions'.

Having been in the business of teaching introductory courses in religious studies to undergraduates for 20 years, Hexham knows the need for 'a book which would be of practical value to the struggling student'. He holds a PhD from Bristol University, and acknowledges his indebtedness to two British scholars in particular, Ninian Smart and Fred Wellbourn. At present he is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

The comprehensiveness of the dictionary can be illustrated by noting the following among no less than 203 entries under the letter A: Abelard, Abortion, Absolute, African Independent Churches, Age of Aquarius, Ahmadaya, Amida, Amulets, Anselm, Aquinas, Arianism, Assassins, and Augustine.

Here are three entries which illustrate the admirable conciseness at which he is constantly aiming (the capitals indicate words covered in other entries):

A PRIORI: known by reason alone prior to sense experience; knowledge which