

## Taking a New Look at General Revelation

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**Abstract:** *General revelation is used by Paul to show why all people stand under the judgement and anger of God. In this article I plead for an expansion of Neil Ormerod's metaphysical transcendent epistemological frame to include a theological immanent epistemological frame. The rational metaphysical conversion that Ormerod pleads for is shown to be inadequate. To speak meaningfully of the God, a second repentance, which Ormerod develops in his theological hermeneutics, is required, namely a repentance from sin. An epistemology grounded on ontology is hereby replaced by an epistemology grounded on theology, anthropology and hamartiology. Humanity's sinful response to general revelation is understood as her unwillingness to place herself at the mercy of a God who is radically different from this reality. The article calls for agnosticism regarding God and the embracing of despair in the light of the human longing for an alternative reality. The transcendent God, it is argued, can only be reached by first embracing the salvation-historical interpretive framework offered in the canonical tradition. General revelation may still be used as a believing reinterpretation of nature, not only in terms of what creation is, but also in terms of what it should become.*

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"The heavens declare the glory of the Lord!" (Ps. 19:1). This cry of worship by the Psalmist has continued to echo in the hearts of believers throughout the ages. And no wonder! Who would deny the powerful impact of contemplating the grandeur and complexity of creation? It is not surprising that most believers acknowledge a revelation of God in or through nature as self-evident.<sup>1</sup> And not only believers: Pinnock suggests: "General revelation ... presents a common ground between the believer and unbeliever."<sup>2</sup> This makes the doctrine both relevant and important to the church.

In this article I will consider the historical theological approaches to general revelation and some critical responses that have succeeded in undermining the doctrine. Combining Neil Ormerod's metaphysical interpretive frame with his hermeneutical epistemology, I will propose, opens a new way to engage with general revelation.<sup>3</sup> Ormerod's call for a "conversion" of physicists to include transcendence in their understanding of reality as well as a "conversion" of believers to interpret empirical

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<sup>1</sup> The hymn "How Great thou art" was voted to be the most popular hymn in the UK in a survey by the BBC "Songs of Praise" see Henry Chadwick and Ian Bradley, *Not Angels but Anglicans: A History of Christianity in the British Isles* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2000), 208.

<sup>2</sup> Pinnock, C.D. in Sinclair B Ferguson, David F Wright, and J. I Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988) 586. Demarest notes: "General revelation, mediated through nature, conscience and the providential ordering of history, traditionally has been understood as a universal witness to God's existence and character." Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982) 14.

<sup>3</sup> See Neil Ormerod, "Bernard Lonergan and the Recovery of a Metaphysical Frame," *Theological Studies* 74/4 (2013): 960-82; "Quarrels with the Method of Correlation," *Theological Studies* 57/4 (1996): 707-19.

reality in the light of the gospel tradition, when combined, creates a new holistic frame within which to interpret reality. I will argue from Romans 1:18-32 that Paul shifts the attention from ontology to anthropology and hamartiology which requires God's historical intervention in the world to transform it. The metaphysical frame, by itself, only points to absence of any true knowledge of God. This, I propose, must lead to agnostic despair of knowing God. God's immanent salvation historical revelation, I will suggest, reaches beyond what is already there, to include what reality will be, and, thus, now already can and should, become. In the final section I will consider some practical limitations which must be heeded for believers to continue to "see" a revelation of God's will and character in creation.

## GENERAL REVELATION AND NATURAL THEOLOGY

The doctrine of general revelation is, by definition, closely related to the Roman Catholic concept of "natural theology." As the name implies, natural theology endeavours to "connect" God and nature with each other without, thereby, extinguishing the essential differences between Creator and creation. Such a unique connecting link was considered to exist in the "rational" human whose mind was held to be "unblemished" and unaffected by the fall into sin. Because humans partakes in the existence of nature as rational beings, they are, therefore, also able, by rational argument, to develop a bridge between their existence, of which they are sure, to the existence of God.<sup>4</sup> Although inadequate (in the sense that such proofs only show God's existence and the fact that God has certain perfections, but cannot give evidence of the details of these qualities), these "dark thoughts" it was held, nevertheless, furnish true knowledge of God. Epistemologically, these theologians argued, natural theology presents a positive point of contact between humanity and God, and, in this sense, prepares the way for special revelation.<sup>5</sup> Modern Catholic theologians, it must be said, have moved away from utilising natural theology as a direct bridge to God.

Many arguments have been brought against natural theology, including from Catholic theologians. Natural theology as traditionally conceived has become a bridge too far, and the possibility of a natural theology, despite the teaching of Vatican I (which Vatican II repeats verbatim in *Dei verbum*), is hardly taken seriously. At least in Catholic theological circles natural theology is all but dead.<sup>6</sup>

The death of natural theology was hastened, amongst other things, by the philosophical critique of its underlying epistemological premises. Immanuel Kant argued, for many philosophers, convincingly, that the spatial category of cause and effect only has relevance in so far as it is directly related to empirical data. Cause and effect can, according to him, furnish no certain knowledge concerning things outside sensually perceived data. Rational argument, starting from existing phenomena can, therefore, never lead to conclusive proof of the existence of a divine (not sensually perceivable), being.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The most important arguments are those of causality, negation and eminence.

<sup>5</sup> Heyns, writing from a Calvinistic point of view, asserts the same of general revelation, but only "in a certain sense." Johan Adam Heyns, *Dogmatiek* (Pretoria: N.G. Kerkboekhandel Transvaal, 1978) 304.

<sup>6</sup> Ormerod, "Bernard Lonergan and the Recovery of a Metaphysical Frame" 960. In a footnote (n.9) Ormerod continues: "Apart from the efforts of a few neo-Scholastics, it is hard to think of any major contribution to the issue of natural theology by a Catholic theologian in the past four decades."

<sup>7</sup> "Catholic philosophers and theologians generally rejected Kant's conclusions and continued to assert the viability of metaphysics." Ibid. 962.

Karl Barth's vehement reaction against natural theology is well known.<sup>8</sup> Barth's reaction was to radically deny any revelation outside of, and apart from, the revelation of God in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

According to Barth any "being" that is posited via the natural abilities of mankind could only be an idol. A theological construction of revelation apart from the qualities of grace, mercy and justice, cannot be a revelation of the God who has fully revealed Himself, once and for all, in Jesus, as a God of grace, mercy and justice. Natural theology which, according to its own admission, cannot identify any of the divine qualities of God, therefore always leads to a "being in itself" apart from grace. As such, natural theology results from the self-justification of sinful humanity which starts from an arrogant premise that God is already revealed and humanity already receptive to this revelation. But revelation is only revelation, according to Barth, where God, in his grace alone, takes the initiative to reveal Himself as a gracious and Holy God, and thereby remains the subject of revelation. There can thus be no room for general revelation as an independent (even if subsidiary) form of knowing God. God never becomes an object of revelation, who can be found by the rational activity of man. Revelation depends solely on God's decision to reveal Himself once and for all through the man Christ Jesus, and is revealed to us only through faith. Anything else is idolatry!<sup>10</sup>

Despite rejecting natural theology, many Reformed and Evangelical scholars still hold fast to the doctrine of general revelation.<sup>11</sup> These scholars, following Calvin's lead, often distinguish between the ontic and noetic categories of general revelation. According to Calvin, God does reveal Himself in nature (ontic category), but sinful humans can only perceive this revelation in the light of God's special revelation in Christ (noetic category). The *analogia entis* (analogy of being) is thus rejected while the reality of God's general revelation is confirmed. At the same time, knowledge of God that leads to salvation is strictly limited to special revelation. To simply postulate an ontic category designated as "general revelation," but one which does not reveal generally, is, however, a contradiction in terms. "Being" and "knowing" cannot so easily be divorced from each other. Semantically we must thus conclude that, in as much as general revelation, according to Calvin's position, is general, it does not reveal, and in as much as it reveals, it is not general.

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<sup>8</sup> See Emil Brunner, Peter Fraenkel, and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology* (London: The Centenary Press, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> For Barth general revelation could never be a second line, next to, or in addition to God's revelation in Christ. "Therefore, when the Bible speaks of this subsidiary line in relation to man in the world, then it cannot mean to indicate 'another, second source for knowing God.' The only possibility which does not blur the main line, is that the one revelation of God produces an echo, or cast a light." G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955) 29.

<sup>10</sup> Barth seems to soften his antipathy to general by referring to "small revelation" apart from God's revelation in Christ. *Church Dogmatics* vol. IV.3.1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010) 97. Gabriel Fracke, however, points out that the constant elements in nature by which God preserves the world do not point directly to God but to the structure of creation itself. Barth, furthermore argues that other events which may function as parables for the revelation in Christ cannot be used to interpret the revelation in Christ, but must be interpreted by the revelation in Christ. Fracke, G. Chapter One, "Revelation" in Sung Wook Chung, *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology: Convergences and Divergences* (Grand Rapids: MI: Paternoster, 2007) 5-7.

<sup>11</sup> Berkouwer, *General Revelation* 21.

## SYMBOLIC WORLDS

Kant has already argued that reality is never a *ding an sich* (thing in itself), something objective outside of, and apart from, us, that we can get to know by engaging directly with it. We can only experience reality, he argued, through certain categories within the human mind, such as space and time, that we impose upon perceived reality to order it.<sup>12</sup> While Kant's rationalism has been discredited, his idea that humanity co-determines reality has been taken up by existential phenomenological philosophers who argue that the world is only what it is because of how we exist as embodied beings in the world. The world is, for instance, only visible because we have eyes; or, manipulable, because we have hands.<sup>13</sup> Ontology is thus the product of epistemology which is the product of anthropology.<sup>14</sup>

The thought that we do not directly engage with reality but are co-creators of reality resonates with how humanity is viewed within Scripture. Berkhof underlines this dimension by depicting humanity as "responsible."<sup>15</sup> To be responsible means that humans are able to communicate: in their naming of the animals they are set apart from the way in which animals and the material world exist. As communicative beings humans are not simply passive recipients of information but rather active interpreters of reality. This reflects that they are able to intentionally recreate existing reality into symbolic worlds of meaning, through language, which they then inhabit as their world and finally as an explanation of the world. According to this view reality is as it is because we believe certain things about it and approach it from a certain theory.

According to Geertz a symbolic world is a socially constructed set of shared meanings that form an ultimate definition and explanation of what "is."<sup>16</sup> It is thus the presuppositions or set of assumptions that we bring to any situation to help us make sense of it. While it seems that the Bible does set humanity apart as co-creators of reality through language, it does not give it the place of creator. To be responsible also means that humanity can only respond to creation as its "given" context. Humanity does not create the animals but names them.

By describing man as "responsible" we delimit him from the outset in his maturity and autonomy. The first word does not come from him. He is made man by an initiative from outside and from above. His creativity is based on reactivity. God addresses the human and calls her away from any definition of herself and her world as an unchangeable given.<sup>17</sup>

Without being grounded in another form of reality within which we are embodied through our own physical existence there are no constraints to the possible worlds that we can create and occupy. Reality, however, does constrain us, the world that we have to live in is, and remains, something different from idealism, fiction and fantasy. While ideals,

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<sup>12</sup> W Luijpen, *Fenomenologie en atheïsme* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1963) 25ff.

<sup>13</sup> W Luijpen, *Existentiële fenomenologie* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1961) 71ff.

<sup>14</sup> Considering the world without humanity is a contradiction. Ibid. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof and Sierd Woudstra, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith* (Grand Rapids Mich: Eerdmans, 2002) 187.

<sup>16</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 91–94.

<sup>17</sup> Berkhof and Woudstra, *Christian Faith* 187.

fiction and fantasy may become reality in the future, their very nature is determined by the fact that, at the moment, they are not.<sup>18</sup>

The ontological “is” of our embodied existence in lived-through reality remains resistant to our language based wishes or interpretations. As Putman contended: “We don’t just have a “thing theory” – that is, a vast system of hypotheses, everyone which entails the existence of material things – but also a thing language, that is a way of talking which constantly presupposes the existence of material things.”<sup>19</sup> The Bible, I would further argue, pictures humanity as more than a passive, transient, synchronic element within the contextual relational structure of language, but pictures it instead as being grounded within a given and, after the fall, resistant, incomplete, or broken, reality.

At this point we have established that ontology, epistemology and anthropology are intertwined in the formation of reality. The question remains as to how God relates to these dimensions of existence?

## POSTULATING GOD – NEIL ORMEROD’S METAPHYSICAL FRAME AND THEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Neil Ormerod pleads for a new epistemological framework in physics which encompasses the metaphysical as well as physical dimensions of reality.<sup>20</sup> He charges scientists such as Krauss and Dawkins with limiting their epistemological framework to the physical dimension of reality and, thereby, denying the critical dialogue between theory and experience. Experience always relies on a reality as an “already-given.” Ormerod points out that the positivistic theories of reality, propounded by these authors, assume the existence of space and time and fail to deal with the theory of existence as existence.<sup>21</sup> The concept of necessary existence to make sense of the world cannot simply be by-passed, even by positing a theory of random multiple universes in which contingency rather than necessity operates.<sup>22</sup> According to Ormerod such infinite sets of multiple universes, to be totally random, must be totally unique in their uncaused differentiation and, thus, not open to any other universe, as this would presuppose a nexus or link and causality. In such cases, however, he argues, the existence of these universes can never be empirically tested from within our given universe, and the dialogue between theory and experience

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Norris, *On Truth and Meaning: Language, Logic and the Grounds of Belief* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006) 79.

<sup>19</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Mind, Language, and Reality* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 24.

<sup>20</sup> Ormerod, “Bernard Lonergan and the Recovery of a Metaphysical Frame.”

<sup>21</sup> Ormerod, following the theologian Bernard Lonergan, distinguishes between intuitive “animal” knowing which sees reality as an “out-there-now” of things, particles, fields and so on in space and time, and rational “human” knowledge which “knows that space exists because it is intelligent and reasonable to affirm its existence.” Neil Ormerod, “The Metaphysical Muddle of Lawrence Krauss: Why Science Can’t Get Rid of God,” item, (February 18, 2013), <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/02/18/3692765.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> “The various universes that constitute the multiverse are ‘causally disconnected,’ which means their existence can never be empirically verified. So in order to overcome anxiety about contingency, Krauss and others who propose the multiverse are willing to ditch a fundamental aspect of scientific method, the demand for empirical verification.” Neil Ormerod, “The Metaphysical Muddle of Lawrence Krauss: Why Science Can’t Get Rid of God,” (February 18, 2013) <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/02/18/3692765.htm>.

necessarily ceases.<sup>23</sup> Without the testing of theories within a testable reality, however, science as science also ceases and thereby also the scientific claims of these writers.

Ormerod argues that all theory presupposes that the reality to which they refer, is intelligible. He steers away from a simplistic proof of God through design by removing God from any direct link to the creation of our particular world. Ormerod, instead, advocates a shift from seeing creation in terms of emergent probability, to seeing creation as possibility.<sup>24</sup> Commenting on Ormerod's book (with Cynthia Crysdale) *Creator God, Evolving World*, Brian Glenney notes that for Ormerod "God's primary agency is tied to his selecting which potentialities are to be actual for our universe, rather than creating our universe wholesale."<sup>25</sup> Ormerod, thus, promotes a metaphysical frame which has place for a necessary existent transcendent God whose design may be indirectly recognised within given reality through scientifically tested intelligent theories.

Ormerod's metaphysical epistemological frame needs to be expanded to incorporate a theological immanent frame, based on his insights regarding theological epistemology. Ormerod, with Doran, concludes that theology, like science, has to deal with "one real world."<sup>26</sup> It is in this context that he deals with sin and evil and the transformational power of the gospel tradition. Both these interpretive frames are required within the doctrine of general revelation. By separating the two interpretive frames, only utilising the transcendent frame when speaking about metaphysical epistemology in the context of physical creation, and the immanent frame when dealing with theological epistemology in the context of meaning, he does not do full justice to the anthropological and theological insights which are developed in Scripture around the doctrine of general revelation.

Ormerod's theological epistemology critiques Tillich's method of correlation by which new truth emerges through the reciprocal questioning of tradition and experience.<sup>27</sup> "What are correlated are the meaning of the original revelation and present day human experience." Tradition and current experience thus "mutually condition each other in generating an understanding of the Christian faith."<sup>28</sup> Ormerod quotes Doran's objections to such a process of correlation: "One cannot determine what is genuinely appropriate to the tradition or what is intelligible in the contemporary situation unless one has differentiated the grounds for appropriating and evaluating both the tradition and the situation. If this process is not simply circular, somewhere along the line one must be using criteria that are distinct from both the tradition and the situation, in order to obtain the required correlation. Since the method itself does not specify how these criteria arise,

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<sup>23</sup> "By definition, these different universes are 'causally disconnected.' If they were not causally disconnected they would not constitute a separate universe, but would be just an odd part of our own universe that we have yet to know and understand (something pointed out by a theological colleague of mine). If they are causally disconnected, then they are in principle empirically unverifiable. Their existence can never be known empirically." Neil Ormerod, "Behold the Mighty Multiverse! The Deficient Faith of Lawrence Krauss," (April 11, 2012), <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/04/11/3474830.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Ormerod here emphasises the creation of humanity.

<sup>25</sup> Brian Glenney, "Creator God, Evolving World," *Christian Scholar's Review* 43/2 (2014): 198.

<sup>26</sup> Ormerod, "Quarrels with the Method of Correlation" 712.

<sup>27</sup> Ormerod includes Rahner, Schillebeeckx and Tracey within this circle. Ibid. 710.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



each theologian using the method adopts his or her own, perhaps covert, often uncritical, even 'common sense,' criteria that, from the methodological viewpoint, are arbitrary."<sup>29</sup>

Theology has to elicit meaning in a particular context. Meaning is, however, more than the fusion of the context with the message of tradition. The context is marked by evil and needs to be transformed by the message of the gospel.<sup>30</sup> The traditional message does not exist as something pure and separate from the world. The tradition, especially the tradition that has gained normative value in the Scriptures, however, bears testimony to the power of the message to overcome and transform the "real" world which includes the physical lived-through reality and the interpretive symbolic worlds which finds expression in different cultures and world-views. Scripture does this by referring to the God who has entered creation, climaxing in the coming of his Son to transform reality in Christ, thereby enabling believers in Christ to participate with his Spirit in the transformation of their own world(s). The meaning of the term "God" can only be theologically explicated by means of this immanent frame which deals with symbolic reality and, thus, with the an interpreted meaningful world. Without such an immanent frame the metaphysically transcendent reality, postulated by the theological frame, remains meaningless. The lived-through physical reality which Ormerod's transcendent metaphysical frame wishes to expand to include transcendence is, of itself, however, not the whole of reality in which humanity finds itself. Without language and theoretical interpretation it is simply a truncated, meaningless and unknowable reality.

According to Paul, everything that humanity does to construct an image of God from nature in answer to general revelation, always results in a distorted view of who God is, and therefore in human guilt.<sup>31</sup> God, we know from the immanent frame of Scripture, is holy, perfect, transcendent and immortal.<sup>32</sup> Nature, on the other hand, as we encounter it experientially, is incomplete, suffering from evil, decay and brokenness. There is, furthermore, no necessary nexus between God and the world, even the world untainted by sin. According to Scripture creation is not a necessary event, but contingent, a result of God's gracious decision to create that which He is not. Creation as such, without the immanent frame, can thus only refer to a perfectly transcendent God as a possibility, radically apart from, and outside of, nature with no ontological bridge between the Creator and creation.<sup>33</sup> Ormerod's switch to an anthropological category becomes very important in this context.

Ormerod calls for anthropological repentance, the embracing of a new epistemological frame, to enable metaphysical reflection which can accommodate both science and theology. With Lonergan he pleads for an "intellectual conversion ... to bring the reader to an act of self-appropriation as a knower, shifting the criteria of reality from the already-out-there-now of extroverted consciousness to a reality, intelligently grasped

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<sup>29</sup> Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (University of Toronto Press, 1990) 42–63.

<sup>30</sup> So Doran in Ormerod, "Quarrels with the Method of Correlation" 711, 714.

<sup>31</sup> Romans 1:18–3:30

<sup>32</sup> Philosophically this also holds true. To speak of a revelation of God in nature necessarily implies a differentiation between God and nature. To say that God is nature or Nature is God, is to collapse the two terms into one another. There can be no revelation of the one in or through the other as there is then only one entity that exists as "is."

<sup>33</sup> Rom 1:20.

and reasonably affirmed.”<sup>34</sup> Doran, according to Ormerod, locates the foundations of theology in the “religiously, morally, intellectually and psychically converted theologian.”<sup>35</sup> This means that “the theological foundations of the debate would not now be the tradition and the present situation, but the converted subjectivity of the theologian.”<sup>36</sup> But can the theological conversion be limited to theologians and is an intellectual conversion enough to provide meaningful metaphysical and theological discourse? Is the need for conversion not tied to the epistemological closed-ness of humanity to the existence of God?

In Romans 1:18-23, Paul explicitly states that the heathen do get to know God by means of general revelation and are, therefore, able to truly worship Him as God (v.21). The term “νοούμενα καθορᾶται” points to the fact that the *nous*<sup>37</sup> of humanity is “open” to God.<sup>38</sup> We can thus conclude from this passage that God reveals himself to humanity through general revelation and humans are considered capable and open to understand and accept that revelation. Paul, then, however, goes further to state that humans always distort this revelation of God.<sup>39</sup> This “crushing of the truth” (v.18), is a deliberate act that renders all people guilty, without an excuse (v.20).<sup>40</sup> It is clear from the context that Paul uses general revelation, in this pericope, to make an “anthropological” rather than a “theological revelatory” point. Sinful humanity always distorts “what can be known of God.”<sup>41</sup> General revelation thus points to the inability of human beings not to suppress and change the truth concerning God.<sup>42</sup> In this text theology is thus intertwined with ontology—God being revealed in that which is—as well as epistemology, anthropology and hamartiology—God not being known because of humanity’s sinful disposition.

The repentance that is required to know God through creation is thus not only a rational epistemological repentance, but also a theological repentance from sin. The sin that Paul has in mind is the sin of humankind to conflate Creator and creation, to turn the invisible qualities of the transcendent God into the visible qualities found in nature. Repentance is, then, not simply a metaphysical turning to a radically transcendent reality, but a turning to the immanent God who encounters humanity through his salvation-historical actions in, and for, fallen creation. General revelation is not an alternative route for fallen humanity to get to know God apart from his actions in history. The everywhere of general revelation is counter-balanced by the humanity’s propensity to always suppress this revelation of God. It is not that humanity cannot know God but that humanity does not

<sup>34</sup> Ormerod, “Bernard Lonergan and the Recovery of a Metaphysical Frame” 962.

<sup>35</sup> Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* 243.

<sup>36</sup> Ormerod, “Quarrels with the Method of Correlation” 713.

<sup>37</sup> The *nous* is not something “divine” or “super-human” in humanity but describes humanity in his deepest and innermost conscious being, see Herman N Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1959) 43.

<sup>38</sup> H. Ridderbos describes the νοῦς as a window through which the light of God’s revelation can reach man. *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>39</sup> It is clear from the broader context that Paul does not allow for any exceptions. The conclusion of his argument in 3:10 says that “no one is acceptable to God. Not one of them understands or even searches for God.”

<sup>40</sup> General revelation is used in the context of “ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὁργὴ θεοῦ” (v.18), that stands in contrast to the gospel in which the “δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ... ἀποκαλύπτεται (v.17).

<sup>41</sup> Paul in no way presumes a “positive” knowledge of God amongst the heathen. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* 145.

<sup>42</sup> It is, therefore, not the case that Paul was in a position to appeal to the Gentiles’ possession of some knowledge of the invisible nature of God as manifested from creation.” Karl Barth, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *Church Dogmatics* (London: T & T Clark, 2004) Vol. 1.2 307.



want to know God as God. General revelation thus points to humanity's need for deep conversion from its sinful antipathy to God.

## AGNOSTICISM AS RESPONSE TO GENERAL REVELATION

In terms of the theological reconstruction of Romans 1:18-23, humanity is seen to be under God's judgement because it has not kept open the possibility for a radically different and perfect Being which could stand over-against this limited and broken reality. God's general non-revelation in nature implies the possibility of a Being whom we can only know on this Being's own terms;<sup>43</sup> a God who would have to take the initiative to reveal him/her/itself, if we are to know this God at all.<sup>44</sup> The phenomena of good and bad, evil and love, which exist in this world, deny the possibility of knowing any of the characteristics of the radically different Being in terms of this reality. People just cannot know whether there is a good and loving God, or a bad and evil God, or a God bearing qualities of both good and evil, or no God at all, outside of given reality. Humanity is left stranded within a broken and limited reality in which they cannot trust, but which, finally, is all that they have to rely upon.

The very existence of love and compassion and beauty within this limited and broken reality, however, forces the longing for, and possibility of, a divine positive being, outside the limitations of nature, upon humanity. These may be likened to Barth's little lights in the world. They resonate with what Pannenberg describes as humanity's openness to the world and, thereby, also, humanity's openness to a possible meta-reality beyond this world.<sup>45</sup> Like Augustine, C. S. Lewis was aware of certain deep human emotions which pointed to a dimension of our existence beyond time and space. There is, Lewis suggested, a profound and intense feeling of longing within human beings, which no earthly object or experience can satisfy. Lewis terms this sense "joy", and argues that it points to God as its source and goal.<sup>46</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar links the glory of God to beauty and wants to use the concept of beauty as the first word in his theology.<sup>47</sup> "If all beauty is objectively located at the intersection of two moments which Thomas calls *species* and *lumen* ("form" and "splendour") then the encounter of these is characterized by the two moments of beholding and being enraptured."<sup>48</sup> For von Balthasar an aesthetic theological approach encompasses a theory of vision and a theory of rapture. "A theory of vision relates to how we perceive God, governed entirely by God's self-revelation and summed up by the expression 'the glory of God.'"<sup>49</sup> Pannenberg links the glory of God to his transcendence. "Any intelligent attempt to talk about God—talk that is critically aware

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<sup>43</sup> The uncertainty of referring to this Being in terms of Him, Her, or It, needs to be maintained.

<sup>44</sup> C. S. Lewis spoke about "a desire that no happiness will satisfy," and which is "still wandering and uncertain of its object and still largely unable to see that object in the direction where it really lies." Quoted by Alister E McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996) 84.

<sup>45</sup> Galloway notes that it is difficult to translate the term *Weltoffenheit* as it is used by Pannenberg. "It is often translated 'openness to the world'; but also carries the meaning ... of openness beyond the world." Alan D. Galloway, *Wolfhard Pannenberg*, vol. 10, *Contemporary Religious Thinkers* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974) 14.

<sup>46</sup> McGrath, *A Passion for Truth* 82.

<sup>47</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord Vol 1: Seeing The Form* (London: Continuum, 1982) 18.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Nichols in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *The Glory of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) 28.

of its conditions and limitations—must begin and end with the confession of the inconceivable majesty of God which transcends all our concepts.”<sup>50</sup> For von Balthasar a theory of rapture has to do with ontology, in terms of both the nature of the divine being and of human beings.

Despair occurs when humanity’s need for, and ability to be open to, a meta-reality is taken seriously, while at the same time humanity realises that reality as a whole, which includes humanity, is radically limited in its ability to mediate such a meta-reality. This despair of agnosticism is the only legitimate reaction of fallen humanity in a fallen world to God’s general revelation of God-self through nature. It is the only response that acknowledges humanity’s responsibility to answer God’s general revelation as well as humanity’s own brokenness in a broken situation that leaves it at the mercy of this God alone.

In contrast to this, the temptation has always been there for people to try and escape from this agnostic despair; to deny the possibility of the radically different meta-reality, by bringing it within their grasp through the acceptance of some form of general revelation of God in nature that makes God known or a metaphysical construction of God outside of nature.<sup>51</sup> Instead of acknowledging their own condemnation (by not being willing to be at the mercy of a God who could be different from this nature), people rather choose to structure religions and idols that can be manipulated from given reality in order to fulfil their need for such a meta-reality.

The agnosticism proposed in this article is rooted in the non-revelation of God in nature that makes it possible for people to deny that the given world is either ultimate or divine.<sup>52</sup> They can, however, only do this in the full knowledge that they do not have any deeper reality than this limited world to fall back on. They are thus forced into a choice that can only lead to despair. God’s judgement on the heathen, and through that, by definition, on all people is because humanity has deliberately rejected this despair. In as much as humans remain sinners, who strive to be god, they always choose to either find in, or manipulate natural reality to be their god, or sink into the despair of meaninglessness.

## GOD’S REVELATION IN NATURE AND HISTORY

The uniqueness of the God of the Bible is that his revelation is not given as a structural part of reality, but, as Karl Barth has pointed out, is always the result of his grace and mercy. God takes the initiative to reveal Himself in the natural world.<sup>53</sup> This natural revelation is the revelation of God’s living presence as the One who stands over-against this reality as the one who is for this reality. It is the revelation of a God, who, in love and commitment to this world, chooses to make a positive impact upon this world. Revelation

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<sup>50</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol 1*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1994), 337.

<sup>51</sup> The fact that mankind always succumbs to this temptation, leads Paul to conclude that humanity is inherently sinful and thus rightfully condemned by God.

<sup>52</sup> The Qoheleth’s devastating analysis of reality as meaningless, even while accepting the existence of a distant metaphysical reality called God, remains valid.

<sup>53</sup> In special revelation God reveals Himself in nature, even to the point of becoming part of nature in the incarnation. General revelation is always only through nature.

is, therefore, to be understood as a history-making activity of God. God acts to accomplish something radically new within nature. Such new events are usually grouped together under the theological banner of “salvation-history.” Salvation-history can never be viewed as just another passing theological fad, or a purely rational construction into which Biblical data are forced. It rather forms the essence of God’s revelation of God-self as the “Over-against”, the “Radically Different.”

In salvation-history God’s revelation in nature bears the character of a battle against the given structure of reality. In analysing history, therefore, all historical events cannot be directly ascribed to the God of the Bible.<sup>54</sup> God’s revelatory involvement in history is selective. If salvation-history is fully accepted against the backdrop of God’s non-revelation of Himself in nature and history, then God’s direct control of this reality is limited to those events that are ascribed to Him by special revelation. God’s actions which over-rule given reality are intrinsically linked to the believing community’s interpretation of these events as revelation of God. Nothing can therefore be directly deduced about God from an act of rape, or an accident in which four children are killed by a drunken driver. It is, also, not possible to draw any direct conclusions concerning the character of God from a “natural” disaster, such as an earthquake which kills thousands of people. Because Jesus is the final and definitive act of God to over-rule this broken reality, the church is called to declare and realise signs of this “over-ruling” in the power of the Spirit within a world which generally and universally reveal only the non-presence and non-ruling of the God of the Bible. This implies that the church has to engage with this world in faith, hope and love. In hope the church awaits the coming new creation and in faith the church grounds its existence on this new creation. In love the church is called to engage with the broken reality to transform it to reflect the new creation.

God’s over-ruling will only become general revelation when Christ returns. For the church, caught in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet”, faith will only turn into sight at the return of Christ. The church, however, through her critical and transformational engagement with the world in faith, hope and love, is called to participate in God’s on-going revelation of himself to everybody, everywhere.

## THE BELIEVING RE-INTERPRETATION OF NATURE

The final question that deserves our attention concerns the believers’ relationship to nature in the light of special revelation. Can they still sing: “How great thou art?”

As we have noted the church is called to reinterpret nature in the light of special revelation without, thereby, disregarding the totally secular non-revelatory structure of nature. Nature can only echo the strains of the gospel message as it reveals the God of love in the person and work of Jesus. While Christian believers may use nature to focus their attention on God, this can only happen within the following parameters:

(1) *The believer can never be passive when using nature to focus more clearly on God.*

Because there is no general revelation of God in nature, humanity is not called to receive “spiritual” impressions from nature. Nature should rather be clearly

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<sup>54</sup> This is contra Pannenberg’s position that all historical events form the agenda for a theology of history. This lack of any direct link between God and reality is the same as with the physical metaphysical frame.

recognised for what it is, namely limited and often the carrier of evil and opposition to the will of God. Humanity should thus never surrender to sentimentality where nature is concerned.

- (2) *The deepest motive for praising God should not come from our contemplation of nature, but should be a response to God's acts of salvation to transform this reality.*

Nature should therefore be re-interpreted by the believer in the light of God's special, salvation-historical revelation. Believers can look at nature differently from the way an agnostic would, in that they have become the grateful receivers of a revelation where God has taken the initiative to change the world.

- (3) *Nature should not be interpreted only in terms of what it is, but should rather be re-interpreted in terms of what it will be, and therefore should be, in the light of God's final goal for it.*

Believers are called not to seek God's fingerprints only in what is already there, but also to focus on what the world should be in the light of their understanding of God's purpose and will for creation in Christ. General revelation thus also focuses on the absence of God and his will in creation and the transformation of reality in which believers are invited to participate.

- (4) *Re-interpretation of nature implies a selection of aspects of nature that can be used as appropriate metaphors to stress certain aspects of special revelation.*

Believers have the responsibility to choose certain aspects of reality, over-against others, that they can use as a lens to focus their attention better on God. Believers, thus, takes the initiative, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and within the parameters of the canon, to use nature as a tool to help them in their worship.

- (5) *The metaphors from nature that can be used for God always have a limited application.*

Metaphors can usually only help us to understand one aspect of Special revelation at a time. The greatness of God, for instance, can be stressed by understanding it in terms of the rising sun. No further implications, however, can be made from the sunrise concerning other aspects of God.

- (6) *Re-interpretation of nature should not focus our attention on nature "per se," but rather on the God who has been revealed as radically different from, but yet totally committed to, nature.*

- (7) *All re-interpretation of nature has the character of a confession of faith.*

Nature can only be re-interpreted as the creation of a loving God, despite what it seems to be, through faith in the God who has revealed himself. Any use of nature, therefore can never offer "proof" of what we believe, but can only illustrate what we believe in the light of God's special revelation.

- (8) *Negative elements in nature and history should be used to underline the brokenness of the world as it awaits the return of our Lord.*

The fact that nature, as a whole, still needs to be brought under the full control of Jesus is to be recognised. Contemplation of nature should thus always carry overtones of the anguished cry of the church: "Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus, Come!" (1 Cor 16:22).

Within these parameters, it is believed, that the church can still look at creation and sing, now with even more meaning, "How great thou art!"

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that general revelation does not open an alternative way for knowing God. Ormerod's call for a rational conversion to broaden the scientific epistemological framework to include a metaphysical-theological dimension was evaluated and found to be lacking. Ormerod's theological epistemological shift, calling for human repentance from sin, however, was found to provide new possibilities when dealing with general revelation. General revelation was shown to be an anthropological, and then more specifically, a hamartiological issue for Paul, rather than a simple ontological problem. The repentant human, it has been argued, is co-opted by God in the transformation of the world and to participate in God's revelation. It is argued that God has definitively over-ruled this world in Christ Jesus, but that God will only fully rule over everything, when Christ returns. It is, furthermore, suggested that believer can creatively re-interpret nature so as to illustrate certain characteristics of God. This re-interpretation, however, has to be done within certain very specific parameters if we want to remain true to the Biblical position on general revelation.

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