

# **The Boyle Lecture 2015**

## **Natural Theology Revisited (Again)**

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A Vote of Thanks to the Lecturer will be proposed by

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## **Background to The Boyle Lectures**

The original series of Boyle Lectures ran from 1692 until the early 1730s. Founded and funded by a bequest from Robert Boyle, the celebrated seventeenth-century natural philosopher, the lectureship was re-established at St Mary-le-Bow in 2004. It now provides an annual platform for a distinguished scientist or theologian to explore the contemporary relationship between the two disciplines. The lectures aim to be faithful to the intention of their founder, for whom religious faith and experimental science were mutually enriching.

The new Boyle Lectures are directed by a board chaired by the Earl of Cork and Orrery (the 1st Earl of Cork (1566-1643) having been Robert Boyle's father). The Lectures are convened by Michael Byrne and have received significant support and encouragement – both financial and in-kind – from a number of parties, to whom the board remains deeply grateful. These include the Worshipful Company of Grocers, the Worshipful Company of Mercers, Gresham College, the Convener, the Boyle family, the discretionary funds of the Bishop of London and the Rector of St Mary-le-Bow, and individual members of the board.

The Boyle Lectures are now an integral part of St Mary-le-Bow's pastoral programme, particularly in its aim to foster dialogue between theology and other disciplines.

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# Natural Theology Revisited (Again)

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**Russell Re Manning** is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy and Ethics at Bath Spa University and a Visiting Fellow of St Edmund's College, Cambridge. A philosopher of religion with wide-ranging research interests in contemporary philosophy and theology, his research engages four related areas: the intellectual history of natural theology; theologies of culture; philosophy of religion; and topics in science and religion. Current projects include work on contemporary revivals of natural theology, an analysis of the use of the concept of emergence in Christian theology, and developing a critical edition of the works of Paul Tillich in English.

His recent publications include *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (OUP, 2014) and *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (CUP, 2009). He has also edited two books in the Barnes & Noble '30-Second' series: his *30-Second Religion* (2011) has sold over 58,000 copies worldwide and been translated into seven languages, and his *30-Second Bible* was published in 2013. He is co-editor (with Michael Byrne) of *Science and Religion in the Twenty-First Century: The Boyle Lectures at St Mary-le-Bow* (2013).

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'Nothing is more disastrous for the theologian himself and more despicable to those whom he wants to convince than a theology of self-certainty.' Paul Tillich, 'The Theologian', in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (London: SCM Press, 1949), p.125.

## I. Introduction: Reconsidering Natural Theology (Again)

This evening I propose to have another look at the very idea of natural theology and, more specifically, to reconsider (again) the vexed question of its apparent demise. I shall also, by way of conclusion, say something about the future of natural theology, the prospects for which are, I think, far from as bleak as is commonly believed.

In brief, my argument will be that neither what I shall call the 'traditional' nor the 'revisionist' accounts of the nature and fate of natural theology are adequate to the task of explaining the peculiar trajectory of its history and, in particular, the consensus view

of its apparent terminal decline since its alleged 'heyday' in the original series of lectures established by Robert Boyle's benefaction of 1691.

To anticipate my main contention: I want to suggest that the fundamental reason behind the seeming eclipse of natural theology in the modern era is the increasing 'specialisation' of Christian theology in the attempts characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by theologians to establish an unambiguous subject matter for theology, initially through the notion of faith and subsequently through that of revelation. It is, I propose, this quest for disciplinary purity that proved fatal for the inherently 'impure' enterprise of natural theology – namely that of looking to nature to speak of God. The conviction of modern theology that it be primarily – indeed exclusively – about religion or about God's own self-revelation is, I propose, incompatible with the idea – crucial to the vibrancy of natural theology – that knowledge of God is not restricted to one specific domain – be it religion or revelation – but is available, in some form or another, to all simply on the basis of their experiences of the world they find themselves in.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Before setting out my 'more revisionist' intervention into the historiographical question of the apparent rise and fall of natural theology and its epistemic authority (by which I simply mean whether its claims to knowledge are taken seriously or not), I want to take a step back and say a few words about the origins of natural theology as a style of thinking, or better perhaps, as a way of seeing the world and the 'whispers of divinity' therein. In so doing, I also hope to define my terms more clearly and to give you something of a sense of my interest in natural theology and of why I think the question of its alleged eclipse is of more than narrow academic interest. The fate of natural theology matters, I venture, in the bluntest terms, because natural theology represents such a fundamental – and dare I say, natural – human attitude. Recent work drawing on cognitive science and evolutionary psychology confirms what my argument from the history of ideas suggests: natural theology and its central arguments have an intuitive appeal that is

hard to resist, even if it is conceded that the arguments lack persuasive power. Natural theological arguments rarely persuade or convince as standalone pure philosophical arguments. Instead, natural theological arguments seem to express intuitive convictions that the operations of human intellect and the ways the world see to be to us as we encounter it are not merely self-contained but rather tell us something, however imprecise, uncertain and incomplete about God. That such a basic human impulse is thwarted by the consensus orthodoxy of the illegitimacy of the natural theological enterprise – or at least its ghettoization within the confines of academic philosophy of religion is, to say the very least, a recipe for tragic alienation and an open invitation to all forms of dogmatism and sectarianism, religious or otherwise.

What I think this recent exciting work confirms is that natural theology is not – and should never have become – an independent type of theology (or philosophy) supposedly self-sufficient and wholly distinct from other forms of theology. Such a thought of the autonomy of natural theology is encouraged by the standard approaches to natural theology, approaches that start out with a stark either/or opposition between natural and revealed theologies – a contrast that I contend has been especially harmful to the proper estimation of the character and ambition of natural theology.

## II. The Three (or Four) Types of Theology

Typical of this approach is James Barr's definition, taken from the first page of his 1993 book, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*:

'Traditionally, "natural theology" has commonly meant something like this: that "by nature", that is, just by being human beings, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at

least a capacity for such awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God.<sup>1</sup>

Barr's definition is uncontroversial in the literature – the only interesting thing about it being that he includes women in the enterprise of natural theology (not, regrettably, something to be taken for granted). Barr is clearly referring to the long-established tradition of defining natural theology against so-called 'revealed theology'. This approach is typically developed in terms (already indicated by Barr's title) of the contrast between the 'two books': nature, the book of God's works, is the subject of natural theology whilst the book of God's words – Scripture – is the subject of revealed theology. The two, the implication seems to be, are different disciplines with different source material, and, it seems, an autonomy one from the other; they may or may not come to similar conclusions, they may, or may not, be given equal standing and the one may be anterior to the other, but we must never in Francis Bacon's words, 'unwisely mingle or confound these two learnings together.' After all, as we have all been primed to ask: 'what has Athens to do with Jerusalem'?<sup>2</sup>

Significantly however, Bacon marked a radical departure from the established practice of hermeneutical theology in his estimate of the 'difference between the visible marks that God has stamped upon the surface of the earth, so that we may know its inner secrets, and the legible words that the Scriptures, or the sages of Antiquity, have set down in the books preserved for us by tradition'. Previously, as Foucault puts it, 'the truth of all these marks – whether they are woven into nature itself or whether they exist in lines on parchments or in libraries – [was] everywhere the same: coeval with the institution of God.'<sup>3</sup> An important consequence of the Baconian 'sharp distinction' between the knowledge yielded by the interpretation of the two books is that it becomes possible to define natural theology against revealed theology in such a way

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<sup>1</sup> James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *Heretics* 7.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Routledge, 2001).

that the two are presented as separate and non-overlapping disciplines, which then stand in some sort of relation one to the other – be that complementary or antagonistic.

This natural/revealed contrast has firmly established itself as the essential starting point for an understanding of the character of natural theology. It is, however, not a helpful point of departure. By contrast, an historical approach to defining natural theology suggests instead that natural theology is best defined not as a body of knowledge distinct from the systematic reflection upon revelation but as an attitude or way of thinking about the divine that can take its place alongside other theological attitudes. In this sense, what marks natural theology out from other forms of theology (other attitudes to or ways of thinking about God) is not so much the source of its knowledge of the divine but rather the manner of the thinking and a sense of what the point of that reflection is.

To make – hopefully – a little more sense of this suggestion, let me turn, for a moment to in Werner Jaeger's words, 'the origin of natural theology and the Greeks.'<sup>4</sup> As he puts it:

'the speculations of the pre-Socratics about the Divine displayed a decided singleness of character in their intellectual form, despite their diversity of aspects and the multiplicity of their points of departure. Their immediate goal was the knowledge of nature or of Being. The problem of the origin of all things was so comprehensive and went so far beyond all traditional beliefs and opinions that any answer to it had to involve some new insight into the true nature of these higher powers which the myths revered as "the gods".'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Werner Jaeger begins the 1947 published version of his 1936 Gifford lectures, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947) with the claim that the book might well have this alternative title.

<sup>5</sup> Jaeger (1947), 172.

He continues to affirm that 'if we ask upon what this new evaluation is based, we find that the real motive for so radical a change in the form of the godhead lies in the idea of the All (*toolon, to pan*).<sup>16</sup> As a result, nothing finite or limited has 'any right to the title of divinity': a thought that in turn leads to the first stirrings of natural theology. Natural theology, then, in this original sense is not simply 'talk about the gods' but the struggle to say anything at all fitting to the true nature of the divine. Crucially, however, this struggle did not take the form of an abstraction away from finite things but instead that of an engagement with nature; it is, Jaeger declares, a 'fact that whenever the Greeks experienced the Divine, they always had their eyes on reality.'<sup>17</sup> Physics, metaphysics, and theology belong unavoidably together and it is precisely this holistic, inclusive, synthetic (impure) attitude that is characteristic of that approach of natural theology that Jaeger describes as 'a specific creation of the Greek mind':

'Theology is a mental attitude which is characteristically Greek, and has something to do with the great importance which the Greek thinkers attribute to the logos, for the word *theologia* means the approach to God or the gods (*theoi*) by means of the logos. To the Greeks God became a problem.'<sup>18</sup>

This problem of God raised by the pre-Socratic concern for the absolute lies behind the classic distinction between three types of theology: mythical, physical, and civil. Augustine reports this distinction, which he attributes to the first century BC Roman writer Marcus Terentius Varro, although it is clear that this is a distinction that Varro himself derives from a well-established Greek tradition.<sup>9</sup> Augustine cites Varro's description:

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<sup>6</sup> Jaeger (1947), 173.

<sup>7</sup> Jaeger (1947), 173.

<sup>8</sup> Jaeger (1947), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VI.5.

'They call one kind of theology fabulous (*mythicon*), and this is chiefly used by poets; another natural (*physicon*), and this is used chiefly by philosophers; another civil (*civile*), and this is what the people in the various countries use....

As to the first of the three I mentioned, there are in it many inventions that are inconsistent with the dignity and the true nature of the Immortals. Such are the tales that one god was born from a head, another from a thigh, another from drops of blood, that gods have been thieves, and adulterers, and have been slaves of men. In a word, herein is attributed to the gods everything which might be attributed not only to mankind, but to the most degraded of mankind....

The second is that on which the philosophers have left us many books, wherein they discuss the origin, dwelling-place, nature, and character of the gods: whether they came into being in time or have existed from all eternity: whether they are derived from fire, as Heraclitus believes, or from numbers, as Pythagoras holds, or from atoms, as Epicurus supposes; and so on with other theories, the discussion of which is more easily tolerated within the walls of a lecture-room than out of doors in public....

The third sort is that which it is the duty of citizens in states, and especially of those who are priests, to know and to put into practice. From this we learn what gods are to receive public worship and from whom; what sacrifices and what other rites are to be performed and by whom....

The first sort of theology is best adapted to the theatre (*ad theatrum*), the second to the world (*ad mundum*), the third to the state (*ad urbem*).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VI.5.

Augustine censures Varro for succumbing to the pressures of a social conformity in his endorsement of civil theology in spite of his obvious (to Augustine at least) inclination towards the natural; for his own part, Augustine himself is unequivocal:

'Some gods are natural, others established by men; and concerning those who have been so established, the literature of the poets gives one account, and that of the priest another – both of which are, nevertheless, so friendly the one to the other, through fellowship in falsehood, that they are both pleasing to the demons, to whom the doctrine of the truth is hostile....

So then, neither by the fabulous nor by the civil theology does any one obtain eternal life....Both are base; both are damnable.'<sup>11</sup>

To put the contrast slightly differently (and less polemically), we might identify the three different types of theology described by Varro as indicating three alternative attitudes towards the task of theology. The point of mythical theology is to tell stories of the gods; it has an educational function in preserving the narratives of a particular religion tradition. What is important to note here is that in spite of the creative and imaginative character of this poetic theology, its primary purpose is to re-tell or re-narrate an established or given set of stories. This is theology as repetition. By contrast, the purpose of civil theology is resolutely practical; its aim is to maintain the *pax deorum* and to ensure that the institutions of the state reflect their divine origins. Civil theology is political and moral theology; it is as Hobbes put it 'not philosophy but law.' As such it is important to note that the primary concern of such a theology is with the secular and its primary purpose is to regulate human affairs in accordance with an established religious tradition. Against both these intentions the aim of natural theology – the theology of the philosophers – is rather in a sense simply *to be concerned* about God. This concern, or worry, about God is, in an important respect, gratuitous. Natural theology is concerned about God for its own sake – simply because the attempt to think

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<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VI.6.

about God compels and invites free and unconstrained reflection. God is an irresistible problem for thought.

At the same time, of course, this sense of natural theology is in Varro's terms best adapted to the world; God is of concern because the thought of God is unavoidable to the philosopher – or indeed, anyone – seeking to make sense of her world and her place in it. Such a natural theology is the culmination of the philosophical engagement with reality, an engagement that transcends reductive naturalism in the ventured hope that, in the words of the Cambridge Platonist John Smith, 'the whole of this visible universe be whispering out the notions of a Deity.' Yet, as Smith continues, 'we cannot understand it without some interpreter within,<sup>12</sup> namely human reason, or *logos* – that disclosive power that gives confidence that these speculations whilst always risked and never finally accomplished are nonetheless not in vain, but rather transformative and even in some sense redemptive. And yet, we should be wary of an over-hasty conclusion that this is *pure* human reason, unaided and autonomous.

As a further speculation here, I suggest that a fourth type may usefully be added to this tripartite scheme of mythic, natural and civil theology. For want of a better term, I shall call this type 'faithful or pistic (*pisticon*) theology'. By this type of theology, I want to indicate what might be called the theology of the believers; it is, to follow Varro's formula, best adapted to the church (*ad ecclesia*). This theology is above all dogmatic or creedal; its aim is to explicate the contents of a religious tradition. In contrast to the mythical type of theology, this is not simply a repetition but an exegetical attitude best encapsulated in Anselm's famous 'motto' of 'faith seeking understanding.' Of course, this type of theology is often described precisely as 'natural theology' – from Anselm's aim in the *Proslogion* 'to prove in a single argument the existence of God, and whatsoever we believe of God' (Preface) to Aquinas' admission that the proposition 'God exists' 'is not self-evident to us; but needs to be demonstrated by things that are more known to us' (ST I.2.1) to name the two most obvious

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<sup>12</sup> John Smith, *Of the Existence and Nature of God*, p. 136.

examples. However, the key distinction that I want to make between this type of theology -faithful theology- and that which Varro designates as natural theology lies in the goal of the respective approaches. Faithful theology takes as its starting point a certain definition of God and aims through its analyses to remain true to its initial assertion; natural theology by contrast has no dogmatic starting point from which to begin and which serves to constrain (or perhaps better contain) its reflections, instead on this view natural theology is better characterised as the search for a definition of God, a quest which it knows can never and will never be fulfilled.

My central contention, is that faithful theologies are, from the outset undertaken on the basis of a commitment to a certain *ecclesiology*, rather than a commitment to "revealed" as opposed to "natural" sources of their theology. Another way of putting this, echoing Martin Heidegger, is to characterise this approach as a "positive" theology, where the *positum* – i.e. the "what is given for theology" – is not primarily revelation, but faith. As Heidegger puts it in the course of distinguishing his own philosophy from theology:

*theology itself is founded primarily by faith, even though its statements and procedures of proof formally derive from free operations of reason.*<sup>13</sup>

This is, of course, not to deny the philosophical sophistication or rigour of Anselm or Aquinas (or of their successors in "philosophical theology") – far from it. However, it is to suggest that this approach entails a significantly different estimation of the character and role of philosophy for theology. At the risk of committing heresy, let me remind you of Bertrand Russell's gloriously allergic conclusion to his discussion of Aquinas in his *History of Western Philosophy*:

'There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Phenomenology and Theology' in John D. Caputo (ed.), *The Religious* (Blackwell, 2002), p. 57.

lead. He is not engaged in an enquiry, the result of which it is impossible to know in advance. Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith....The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading. I cannot, therefore, feel that he deserves to be put on a level with the best philosophers of either Greece or of modern times.<sup>14</sup>

Russell is, of course, undoubtedly mistaken in his dismissive view of Aquinas' engagement with philosophy as a kind of 'pick and mix' exercise of opportunistic self-justification, combined with smug dogmatic indifference. He is also – I am sure all here would agree – wrong in his denigration of Aquinas' philosophical acumen. But, he does have an important point: Aquinas' starting point is not that of the Platonic Socrates, who begins in awe and wonder knowing nothing and whose philosophical journey culminates in the achievement of a natural theology of learned ignorance, it is rather that of a faithful believer, whose *sacra doctrina* aims to treat 'all things...under the aspect of God' (ST 1.1.7) and which itself is subalternated to God's own knowledge of himself. To return to my previous distinction: whereas natural theology is in search of God, striving towards a definition of God, faithful theology is the attempt to understand a God already in some sense known (and certainly known to himself), it aims to expound upon its received and adhered to definition of God. Bertrand Russell is correct in as much as it does seem clear that Aquinas and the Platonic Socrates do have different estimations of the scope and ambition of philosophy within theology; this difference is partly, I suggest explained by my distinction between 'faithful' and 'natural' theologies.

### III. From the 'traditional' to the 'revisionist' Histories of Natural Theology

Moving from Aquinas to the modern era, it is, I suggest, the fate of modern theology to have increasingly become dominated by my fourth type of theology alone, to the

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<sup>14</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (Routledge, 1946,1961), 453-4.

exclusion of any other. Indeed, if any other type of theology is permitted at all it is on the condition that it be subordinated to the primacy of theology as faithful response. Exceptions, of course, prove the rule and the recent interest in 'theopoetics', for example may be a sign that the iron grip of theological positivism is loosening – as hopefully, is the rise of revisionist proposals for natural theology. However, for such a possibility truly to be realised I argue that a 'more revisionist' interpretation of natural theology is required. And that such a project might start with a reconsideration of the historical question of the supposed rise and fall of natural theology as the early modern period gave way to the epoch of late and the post-modernity. And it is to this that I now turn.

Just as is the case in the science-and-religion debate more generally, we first have to deal with a persistent – if patently false – 'traditional' narrative of the inevitable waning of natural theology in the face of the unremitting progress of scientific naturalism and the atheism that is said to stem from it. According to this Whiggish view of scientific progress at the expense of theological superstition – given its most dramatic recent airing by Richard Dawkins – early-modern natural theology emerged in the wake of the scientific revolution as a short-lived and misguided reception of the new experimental empirical science by religious believers naïve to its full implications. Encapsulated in the famous remark attributed to Laplace, slowly but surely the scientists simply had no need of the hypothesis of God and thus the days of natural theology were always numbered, notwithstanding the initial impetus given to the project by the works of such 'priests of nature' as Robert Boyle himself. Inevitably, the great hero of this account is Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution by natural selection provided the definitive rebuke to the last lingering wishful thinking and natural theological naivety, helpfully collated in William Paley's flawed 1802 compendium, *Natural Theology*.

Fortunately, this simplistic and clearly ideologically driven traditional narrative has rightly been exposed as fraudulent myth-making, notably of course, by the 2010

Boyle Lecturer, John Hedley Brooke – even if, sadly, it persists in the public imagination, along with the broader conflict thesis of which it is a part. I do not intend here to recount the catalogue of this traditional view's deficiencies; instead I want to pay attention to one of the most influential 'revisionist' accounts that aims to place the rise and fall of natural theology in a far more nuanced story of the origins of modern atheism and the eclipse of theological authority. I refer here to the work of the intellectual historian Michael Buckley. In short, Buckley argues that early-modern natural theology emerged as a deliberate attempt by Christian theologians to respond to what they perceived as the dangers of a putative atheism taking shape in the burgeoning natural philosophy. For Buckley, natural theology represents an attempt by Christian theologians to outflank any potential atheistic natural philosophy by taking it on on its own terms and 'occupying' – and thereby neutralising – its distinctive epistemic authority. Unfortunately, the irony of the story for Buckley is that precisely by aping the natural scientists the theologians in effect abandoned their own particular, native, if you will, grounds of authority. By adopting the norms and criteria of the natural philosophers the theologians evacuated their own – properly religious – grounds of any authority. From such honest but misguided attempts to outplay the scientists at their own game the legitimacy of distinctly theological argument was lost and the modern situation of default atheism was born.

For Buckley, the lesson is clear: theology must abandon its aspiration to get the better of atheistic natural philosophy – theology should have no desire to become scientific; such a legitimacy tactic is bound to fail. Not because of the inevitable superiority of science over theology, but simply because the dice are unavoidably loaded. Theology just cannot become philosophy without ceasing to be theology. Like a cricket team endeavouring to prove their superiority over a rugby team by playing – and obviously losing – a game of rugby, so natural theology is a doomed enterprise – never truly natural nor truly theology. Instead, theologians ought to summon up the courage of their convictions and return unapologetically to their own indigenous roots –

a task that has recently been taken up with gusto by the adherents of so-called 'radical orthodoxy'.

In many ways Buckley's argument reprises the analysis offered by David Hume in his posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. There Hume ridiculed the efforts of the natural theologians, represented by the character of Cleanthes and instead concluded that theological speculation ought to be governed by faith. As an hypothesis God fails miserably to satisfy the demands of scientific enquiry, resulting ironically in the triumph of the 'careless scepticism' of the character Philo. The moral of the story then – fearlessly ignored by Dawkins et al, in spite of their great esteem for Hume – is that God fails as an hypothesis precisely because God is not an hypothesis: God does not/cannot explain anything in scientific terms and hence if that is what natural theology is then it is obvious that it will soon wither and die.

#### IV. Towards a 'More Revisionist' History of the Rise and Fall of Natural Theology in Modernity

However, and here I turn to my own 'more revisionist' account, unfortunately for them both Buckley and Hume fundamentally misrepresent the natural theology over whose funeral they preside. Far from the disciplinary purity envisaged by such definitions of natural theology, as that of James Barr referred to earlier, the natural theology of the original series of Boyle Lectures, for instance, by no means stood in opposition to its supposed poetic, civil and faithful rivals; but rather frequently moved from one to another without any noticeable anxiety. In some sense, indeed, it is questionable whether the natural theology typical of this period is in fact natural theology at all, if by that is intended the strict either/or of analytic classification for it repeatedly violates the disciplinary strictures and is as much concerned with revelation as it is with nature. Instead, in their different and non-homogenous ways, the original Boyle Lecturers may rightly be considered as the heyday of modern natural theology in their joyful

promiscuity with regard to potential sources of knowledge of God – and in some of the rather radical conclusions that such speculations led them to.

What unites the Boyle Lecturers – and early-modern natural theology more generally – and what does, after all, make them exemplary instances of the genre is their insistence on the inadequacy of any particular ‘essence’ of Christianity – be that the experimental natural philosophy or the ‘book learned’ Scriptural and ecclesial traditions. What brought this strand of natural theology to its apparent end, then, was not, I suggest, its inappropriate mimicking of the epistemic authority of the emergent natural philosophy, but rather an alternative loss of nerve. Rather than holding fast to the plural and multi-disciplinary vision of natural theology as the inherently unstable enterprise of seeing more in nature than nature alone, panicked by the apparent threat of atheism (the rumours of which were greatly exaggerated in this period – as in any other), the theologians looked instead for certainty and the single-minded security of an essentialist approach to theology that identified theology with systematic reflection on religion and/or revelation.

Natural theology appears to fail, in my view, because it got crowded out by various quests for theological purity, with the result that it is only those exclusivist forms of natural theology – i.e. those that affirm (precisely against the grain of the wider tradition of natural theology) that reason alone can suffice to provide knowledge of God without any (or at least without any prior) reference to other sources that are recognised – and condemned – as such. In other words, natural theology becomes reduced to those atypical forms that construe it as concerned with, as it were, epistemic access points to God, such that the persistence of the heirs to the broader tradition of Varro’s theology of the philosophers goes unrecognised. As such, Karl Barth’s aversion to natural theology is well-founded; if the only legitimate form of theology is faithful theology as a response to the clearly circumscribed ‘*positum*’ (or subject matter) of God’s self-revelation in Christ, then understandably any claims to alternative sources of knowledge of God are to be resisted in the strongest possible terms. In this sense,

Barth's antipathy towards natural theology is equally shared by his supposed arch-enemy, the 'Father of liberal theology', FDE Schleiermacher. Whereas Barth's 'Nein!' to any prospect of natural theology is justly famous, Schleiermacher's identification of theology with systematic reflection on the Christian faith (theology as *Glaubenslehre*), is equally dogmatic in its rejection of the messy uncertainty of open-ended natural theology. And this in spite of Schleiermacher's heroic work in translating Plato into German and insisting on the importance of the aesthetic for theology. Ultimately, however, for Schleiermacher, theology is subordinated to faith, such that the 'father of liberal theology' seems to have more in common with that most dramatically 'faithful' of the 19<sup>th</sup> century theologians, Soren Kierkegaard, than he does with his contemporary, great rival and proponent of a form of natural theology, GWF Hegel.

But: before we disappear down the rabbit hole of German philosophical theology, I want to turn to the strange persistence of natural theology after its official demise.

## V. The Strange Persistence of Natural Theology

As you may have noticed throughout my lecture this evening I have carefully qualified the language of the 'rise and fall' of natural theology in the modern era. I now want to be explicit: I do not accept that natural theology was fatally undermined, nor, of course, that it in any sense originated with the scientific revolution. As a result of the consensus turn to theological positivism, natural theology was indeed side-lined and yet throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries its epistemic authority remained largely intact: it just no longer appealed as the preferred option for the theologians, replaced instead by the rise and institutional establishment of systematics or dogmatics as the truly theological discipline – what my former colleague at Aberdeen, John Webster characterises as '*theological* theology'.

Whilst marginalised, however, natural theology never really went away and continued to develop, frequently in some surprising directions. For example natural

theologies are found in the works of the German Idealists, Hegel Schelling, and their English co-conspirator, ST Coleridge, as well as with the reforming theologians of *Lux Mundi*. That there was so much more to 19<sup>th</sup> century natural theology than our exclusive focus on Paley and the Bridgewater Treatises deserves far greater recognition. Indeed John Henry Newman's strident rejection of natural theology – as what he called a 'religion of inferences' that turns 'theology into evidences' – is echoed by Coleridge, who condemned Paley's misguided efforts to prove the existence and nature of God through an extended argument from design alone even as he advanced his own for of natural theology as part and parcel of his wider project of reanimating the Christian imagination of his time.

One further compelling example of the persistent yet transformed presence of natural theology late into the 20<sup>th</sup> century is Paul Tillich and his radical reformulation of the very task of theology from dogmatics to what he called 'theology of culture'. Whilst Tillich explicitly rejects any appeals to 'nature' for his constructive theology, his reticence is not a rejection of the logic and aspirations of Varronian natural theology, but instead a revisionist view of how best to characterise the world in which we live and through which we can come to knowledge of God. For Tillich, simply put, the world that we experience is that of *historical* existence and not merely nature as given to us by the sciences. Hence, Tillich's call for a project of 'theology of culture' in which claims about God are to be made through normative cultural interpretation and not only through the systematic unpacking of doctrinal *loci*. In this sense then, Tillich's theology of culture, even if it has little whatsoever to do with arguments to prove the existence of God – an enterprise that Tillich found ridiculous and not a little blasphemous – is one of the most developed natural theologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, Tillich also wrote a *Systematic Theology* and yet this fact hardly distracts from his basic allergy (characteristic of natural theologians) to all attempts to identify the subject matter of theology exclusively in anything specifically 'religious'.

## VI. Conclusion: The Prospects for Natural Theology

In conclusion, I propose that it is with approaches consistent with Tillich's displacement – or dis-location – of theology from its essentialist positivism that the future of natural theology lies. As might be expected, I am not convinced that the prospects for natural theology are most likely to be fulfilled by either of the two academic specialisms most closely associated with the term, namely the philosophy of religion and the science-and-religion field. This is, of course, by no means to deny that there is interesting and important work to be further developed in both of these areas. But, both – at least in their currently dominant forms – tend to adopt overly restrictive conceptions of natural theology that surely hinder its future, if it is only here that we look for signs of hope.

Philosophy of religion, especially in its majority Anglo-American analytic strands operates with a radically constricted notion of natural theology that simply equates it with philosophical argument for the existence of God. A mere glance at the Table of Contents of the recent *Blackwells Companion to Natural Theology*, edited by J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig suffices to confirm that its estimation of natural theology, whilst of some use in combating aggressive philosophical naturalism, will do little to reinvigorate natural theology as the enterprise of contemplative speculation about God on the basis of our experience of the world we find ourselves in.

Likewise, the contemporary consensus in the academic field of science-and-religion offers little for the future enhancement of natural theology, albeit for different reasons. Increasingly, those working in science-and-religion seem committed to a view of natural theology that permits it a place, but only on condition that it take its place securely within, and explicitly subordinated to, faithful theology. Both last year's Boyle Lecturer and next year's (Alister McGrath and Sarah Coakley) are typical of this tendency. Whilst the both have very different projects and reasons to recall natural theology as part of their work, both do share a common insistence that any form of revived natural theology must be relocated within the orbit of systematic theology; a move that partly explains their shared conviction that any revived natural theology must

be very different from its 'Enlightenment' or Paley-ite ancestor. What both overlook is precisely that the 'antiquated' forms of natural theology that they reject were only ever a minority strand within the broader tradition of natural theology and, indeed, one of the least representative of its nature and ambitions.

So where might we look to discern indications of the future for natural theology? Following my earlier suggestion, I propose that it is to those whose work attempts to escape the exclusive dominance of faithful theology – not out of impious iconoclasm – but rather out of a desire to liberate theology from an overly restrictive dependence on religion. To put this in more Tillichian terms, I find promise for the future of natural theology in that work for which the reach of the 'theological circle' is wider than any one particular religious tradition and that ranges inclusively across nature and culture and across religions without lapsing into mere description. Precisely what this will look like is, I'm afraid, the topic for another occasion, but one thing is clear to me (at least): the future of natural theology will be a cautious and humble attempt to give voice to the whisperings of divinity in the world as we experience it. Neither autonomous of nor subservient to faithful theology, such a natural theology aims to respond to the 'rumours of angels' (in Peter Berger's wonderful phrase) that put the lie to claims to the self-sufficiency of the natural and, to recall Tillich's warning from my epigraph, the disaster of a theology of self-certainty.

On this admittedly vague, yet hopeful, note, I must conclude. It has been a great privilege for me to have been permitted to indulge in these speculations about the nature, state, and future of natural theology in such an appropriate setting. It has been an honour and I am truly grateful both for the opportunity and for your attention. Thank you.

## Response to the Boyle Lecture delivered by Russell Re Manning

Louise Hickman

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Thank you, Russell, for an enriching and stimulating lecture; we have been inspired with great hope as to how natural theology might be reconsidered (again), and also as to how such a reconsideration might reinvigorate the both the science-religion conversation and also the philosophy of religion. In response I would like to make just four short points.

Firstly, the distinction between natural and faithful theology makes an astute framework with which to view the current climate of philosophical theology and the prospects for its future. Personally, I think a little heresy is good for the critical soul, and so I rather enjoyed being reminded of Bertrand Russell's assessment of Aquinas. I think Russell illustrated here precisely why there seems to be a certain malaise among philosophers of religion in recent years.

His contrasting of the respective journeys of Aquinas and Socrates reminded me of John Cottingham's lament that the current state of analytic philosophy has become not so much an intrepid voyage of discovery but rather more of a carefully planned cruise. We might say that both faithful *pistic* theology on the one hand and a philosophical approach that seeks to work from reason alone on the other have, sometimes paradoxically, a tendency to relax on the deck loungers (cocktails in hand perhaps)

side-by-side. Neither one can be called strict repetition but both, as Russell helps us to see, are inclined to expound received definitions. His proposal for a reconsidered natural theology orientates us instead towards the more adventurous waters of learned ignorance and it certainly puts paid to the suggestion that natural theology requires the evidence of the world around us to be used for the justification of the nature and existence of God.

This leads me on to my second point. Russell's fourth category of faithful theology does a much needed demolition job on the dichotomy between natural and revealed theology. He demonstrates to us eloquently how Athens and Jerusalem are indeed not worlds apart; they make a tradition more akin to a sprawling conurbation replete with heavy traffic and an untangleable spaghetti junction. The trouble with Michael Buckley's reading of history is that it already assumes this dualism and thus can only entrench it, making the two theologies mutually exclusive and thereby aligning revelation with the 'faithfulness' model. Russell is right that there is much in Buckley's narrative that does not fit the history of the so-called late seventeenth and early eighteenth century heyday of natural theology and I heartily embrace his discerning proposal of a historical tack to rectify these misapprehensions.

I would diverge somewhat from him, however, by taking a different historical approach, and this constitutes my third point this evening. I would like to see historical study do even more work to aid a reconsideration of natural theology. Jonathan Israel has shown us that intellectual ideas are not mere epiphenomena (as some historians would have it) but rather they are vital for moulding our political and social values. He calls for a new, reformed intellectual history that promotes a 'dialectic of ideas and social reality'. This immediately focuses our attention on the political and social contexts of these historical ideas and points us towards a deeper realisation of their potency.

If we turn to natural theology we might consider just one example: if the cosmic craftsman model of God together with the idea of creation as an engine or artisanal structure were originally promoted in order to challenge natural begetting as the foundation for monarchy (and thereby the authority of fathers as derived from the authority of God) then we need to think about natural theology as an important theological response to what were perceived to be damaging structures of hegemonic power. Israel's line of approach points us towards a deeper contextualisation of theological ideas than Buckley allows and I think this could be a vital tool for the imagining of a broader natural theology. I do not believe that we are forced to embrace relativism and/or the death of God if we appreciate more fully how our ways of theological thinking are culturally and contextually embedded (and I am sure Russell would agree with me on this). I am drawn, therefore, to his conception of natural theology as an attitude or way of thinking about the divine but I think there is room to develop further the dialectic that Israel calls for, especially with regard to the wider social and ethical context.

Fourthly, I would have a different (but perhaps complementary) vision of myth. The new avenues for natural theology that Russell identifies offer, I would like to suggest, a way to embed myth at the heart of natural theology. Mary Wollstonecraft (one woman who isn't usually, but really ought to be, considered as an eighteenth century natural theologian) wondered why, when so many people say they love rural scenes, did she never see anyone else while she was out on her early morning rambles? Maybe, she mused, the supposed taste for the rural landscape is actually the product of poetry and romances rather than 'a real perception of the beauties of nature'.

Robert Macfarlane more recently expressed a similar sentiment in his *Mountains of the Mind*, a history of human fascination with climbing mountains despite their obvious perils. Our very perception of their terrain is moulded by our imagination and our emotional response. The language of myth is indispensable here, not in the sense of

mere fanciful stories but rather in the sense of imaginative symbols that are essential for the way we see the world.

Natural theology, defined as Russell so fittingly puts it, 'as a way of seeing the world' and the 'whispers of divinity' therein, is typically suffused with myth: what is seen as beautiful or orderly, and what we see as worthy of contemplation, is shaped by our prior understanding of the world and, crucially, what we believe to be valuable. The natural theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were concerned to defend an ethical conception of nature by promoting a symbolic image of a cosmos saturated in the *telos* of divine purpose and ethical value, and the Platonists before them were concerned to prioritise the contemplation of (rather than control over) the natural world. This was how Wollstonecraft could say that when she walked amidst the wonders of nature, she was accustomed to converse with her God. Russell has inspired me to believe, therefore, that the resourceful direction for natural theology that he has set before us contains many exciting possibilities. I might venture to suggest that natural theology can spin its own myth to challenge what have become the dominant myths of our own age; not least competitive individualism, inevitable violence, and the omniscience of scientism. Seen in this way, myth might then complement Russell's insightful account of natural theology as a fundamental human attitude, and natural theology might – to its advantage – be made considerably more impure: a commendable task that Russell has so adeptly shown us is very much to be desired. On that note, I should like to end, thanking Russell once again for his invigorating and thoughtful lecture. I am deeply enthused by what he has said here tonight and I am led to have great hope for the future of natural theology.

## **The Boyle Lecture 2016**

The thirteenth Boyle Lecture will take place on

**Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2016**

and the Board is pleased to announce that the speaker will be

**Professor Sarah Coakley**

As Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, Sarah Coakley holds the established chair at that university in philosophy of religion. She has previously held positions at the Universities of Lancaster, Oxford, and Harvard, and a visiting professorship at Princeton. Professor Coakley has also been awarded honorary degrees by the University of Lund, the University of St Andrew's, and General Theological Seminary, New York.

In 2012 she delivered the Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen on the topic 'Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God'. In 2012 she was also elected a member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts, and in 2013 the President of the British Society for Philosophy of Religion.

## Previous Boyle Lectures

- 2004 John F. Haught  
**Darwin, Design and the Promise of Nature**
- 2005 Simon Conway Morris  
**Darwin's Compass: How Evolution Discovers the Song of Creation**
- 2006 Philip Clayton  
**From Complexity to Anthropology to Theology**
- 2007 John D Barrow  
**Cosmology of Ultimate Concern**
- 2008 Malcolm Jeeves  
**Psychologising and Neurologising about Religion: Facts, Fallacies and the Future**
- 2009 Keith Ward  
**Misusing Darwin: The Materialist Conspiracy in Evolutionary Biology**
- 2010 John Hedley Brooke  
**The Legacy of Robert Boyle – Then and Now**
- 2011 Jürgen Moltmann  
**Is the world unfinished? On interactions between science and theology in the concepts of nature, time and the future**
- 2012 Celia Deane-Drummond  
**Christ and Evolution: A Drama of Wisdom?**
- 2013 John Polkinghorne  
**Science and Religion in Dialogue**
- 2014 Alister McGrath  
**New Atheism - New Apologetics: The Use of Science in Recent Christian Apologetic Writings**