THE OPEN SECRET

A New Vision for Natural Theology

ALISTER E. McGRATH

Blackwell Publishing

Contents

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I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

Isaac Newton (1643–1727)

The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way... To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion – all in one.

John Ruskin (1819–1900)

Additional praise for The Open Secret

“For much of the twentieth century natural theology was regarded as intellectually moribund and theologically suspect. In this splendid new book, bestselling author and distinguished theologian Alister McGrath issues a vigorous challenge to the old prejudices. Building on the foundation of the classical triad of truth, beauty, and goodness, he constructs an impressive case for a new and revitalized natural theology. This is a well-conceived, timely, and thoughtprovoking volume.”

Peter Harrison, Harris Manchester College, Oxford

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Alister McGrath

Oxford, June 2007

CHAPTER 1

Natural Theology: Introducing an Approach

> The heavens are telling the glory of God;
> and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
> Day to day pours forth speech,
> and night to night declares knowledge.
>
> *(Psalm 19: 1)*
>
> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
> the moon and the stars that you have established;
> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
> mortals that you care for them?
>
> *(Psalm 8: 3–4)*
>
> For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
> so are my ways higher than your ways
> and my thoughts than your thoughts.
>
> *(Isaiah 55: 9)*

These familiar words from the Hebrew Scriptures characterize the entire enterprise of natural theology: they affirm its possibility, while pointing to the fundamental contradictions and tensions that this possibility creates. If the heavens really are "telling the glory of God,"[1] this implies that something of God can be known through them, that the natural order is capable of disclosing something of the divine. But it does not automatically follow from this that *human beings*, situated as we are within nature, are capable

unaided, or indeed capable under any conditions, of perceiving the divine through the natural order. What if the heavens are “telling the glory of God” in a language that we cannot understand? What if the glory of God really is there in nature, but we cannot discern it?

Natural theology can broadly be understood as the systematic exploration of a proposed link between the everyday world of our experience[2] and another asserted transcendent reality,[3] an ancient and pervasive idea that achieved significant elaboration in the thought of the early Christian fathers,[4] and continues to be the subject of much discussion today. Yet it is essential to appreciate that serious engagement with natural theology in the twenty-first century is hindered both by a definitional miasma, and the lingering memories of past controversies, which have created a climate of suspicion concerning this enterprise within many quarters. As Christoph Kock points out in his excellent recent study of the fortunes of natural theology within Protestantism, there almost seems to be a presumption in some circles that “natural theology” represents some kind of heresy.[5]

The lengthening shadows of half-forgotten historical debates and cultural circumstances have shaped preconceptions and forged situation-specific approaches to natural theology that have proved singularly ill-adapted to the contemporary theological situation. The notion of “natural theology” has proved so conceptually fluid, resistant to precise definition, that its critics can easily present it as a subversion of divine revelation, and its supporters, with equal ease, as its obvious outcome. Instead of perpetuating this unsatisfactory situation, there is much to be said for beginning all over again, in effect setting aside past definitions, preconceptions, judgments, and

prejudices, in order to allow a fresh examination of this fascinating and significant notion.

This book sets out to develop a distinctively Christian approach to natural theology, which retrieves and reformulates older approaches that have been marginalized or regarded as outmoded in recent years, establishing them on more secure intellectual foundations. We argue that if nature is to disclose the transcendent, it must be "seen" or "read" in certain specific ways – ways that are not themselves necessarily mandated by nature itself. It is argued that Christian theology provides an interpretative framework by which nature may be "seen" in a way that connects with the transcendent. The enterprise of natural theology is thus one of discernment, of seeing nature in a certain way, of viewing it through a particular and specific set of spectacles.

There are many styles of "natural theology," and the long history of Christian theological reflection bears witness to a rich diversity of approaches, with none achieving dominance – until the rise of the Enlightenment. As we shall see, the rise of the "Age of Reason" gave rise to a family of approaches to natural theology which asserted its capacity to demonstrate the existence of God without recourse to any religious beliefs or presuppositions. This development, which reflects the Enlightenment's emphasis upon the autonomy and sovereignty of unaided human reason, has had a highly significant impact on shaping Christian attitudes to natural theology. Such has been its influence that, for many Christians, there is now an automatic presumption that "natural theology" designates the enterprise of arguing directly from the observation of nature to demonstrate the existence of God.

This work opposes this approach, arguing for a conceptual redefinition and methodological relocation of natural theology. Contrary to the Enlightenment's aspirations for a

universal natural theology, based on common human reason and experience of nature, we hold that a Christian natural theology is grounded in and informed by a characteristic Christian theological foundation. A Christian understanding of nature is the intellectual prerequisite for a natural theology which discloses the Christian God.

Christianity brings about a redefinition of the "natural," with highly significant implications for a "natural theology." The definitive "Christ event" as interpreted by the distinctive and characteristic Christian doctrine of the incarnation can be said to redeem the category of the "natural," allowing it to be seen in a new way. In our sense, a viable "natural theology" is actually a "natural Christian theology," in that it is shaped and made possible by the normative ideas of the Christian faith. A properly Christian natural theology points to the God of the Christian faith, not some generalized notion of divinity detached from the life and witness of the church.[6]

The notion of Christian *discernment* – of seeing things in the light of Christ – is frequently encountered throughout the New Testament. Paul urges his readers not to "be conformed to this world," but rather to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12: 2) – thus affirming the capacity of the Christian faith to bring about a radical change in the way in which we understand and inhabit the world.[7]

The New Testament uses a wide range of images to describe this change, many of which suggest a change in the way in which we see things: our eyes are opened, and a veil is removed (Acts 9: 9–19; 2 Corinthians 3: 13–16). This "transformation through the renewing of the mind" makes it possible to see and interpret things in a new way. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures came to be understood as pointing beyond their immediate historical context to their

ultimate fulfillment in Christ.[8] In a similar way the world comes to be seen as pointing beyond the sphere of everyday experience to Christ its ultimate creator.[9]

A Christian natural theology is thus about seeing nature in a specific manner, which enables the truth, beauty, and goodness of God to be discerned, and which acknowledges nature as a legitimate, authorized, and limited pointer to the divine. There is no question of such a natural theology "proving" the existence of God or a transcendent realm on the basis of pure reason, or seeing nature as a gateway to a fully orbed theistic system.[10] Rather, natural theology addresses fundamental questions about divine disclosure and human cognition and perception. In what way can human beings, reflecting on *nature* by means of *natural* processes, discern the transcendent?

This book represents an essay – in the classic French sense of *essai*, "an attempt" – to lay the ground for the renewal and revalidation of natural theology, fundamentally as a legitimate aspect of Christian theology, but also as a contribution to a wider cultural discussion. Natural theology touches some of the great questions of philosophy, and hence of life. What can we know? What does what we know suggest about reality itself? How does this affect the way we behave and what we can become? These questions refuse to be restricted to the realms of academic inquiry, in that they are of relevance to culture as a whole.

The book thus sets out to re-examine the entire question of the intellectual foundations, spiritual utility, and conceptual limits of natural theology. Such a task entails a critical examination of the present state of the debate, but also rests on a historical analysis. Crucial to this is the observation that the definition of natural theology was modified in the eighteenth century in order to conform to the Enlightenment agenda. As a result, natural theology has

come to be understood primarily as a somewhat unsuccessful attempt to prove the existence of God on the basis of nonreligious considerations, above all through an appeal to “nature.”

The book is broken down into three major parts. It opens by considering the perennial human interest in the transcendent, illustrating its persistence in supposedly secular times, and describing the methods and techniques that have emerged as humanity has attempted to rise above its mundane existence, encountering something that is perceived to be of lasting significance and value. This is correlated with contemporary understandings of the psychology of perception.

The second part moves beyond the general human quest for the transcendent, and sets this in the context of an engagement with the natural realm that is sustained and informed by the specific ideas of the Christian tradition. Natural theology is here interpreted, not as a general search for divinity on terms of our own choosing, but as an engagement with nature that is conducted in the light of a Christian vision of reality, resting on a trinitarian, incarnational ontology. This part includes a detailed exploration of the historical origins and conceptual flaws of the family of natural theologies which arose in response to the Enlightenment, which dominated twentieth-century discussion of the matter.

The third and final part moves beyond the concept of natural theology as an enterprise of sense-making, offering a wider and richer vision of its tasks and possibilities. It is argued that rationalist approaches to natural theology represent an attenuation of its scope, reflecting the lingering influence of the agendas and concerns of the “Age of Reason.” Natural theology is to be reconceived as involving every aspect of the human encounter with nature – rational, imaginative, and moral.

In that this volume offers a new approach which poses a challenge to many existing conceptions of the nature and possibilities of natural theology, in what follows we shall set out a brief account of its leading themes, which will be expanded and extended in subsequent chapters.

“Nature” is an Indeterminate Concept

The concept of natural theology that became dominant in the twentieth century is that of proving the existence of God by an appeal to the natural world, without any appeal to divine revelation. Natural theology has come to be understood, to use William Alston’s helpful definition, as “the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs.”[11] The story of how this specific understanding of natural theology achieved dominance, marginalizing older and potentially more productive approaches, is itself of no small interest.[12] One of the major pressures leading to this development was the growing influence of the Enlightenment, which placed Christian theology under increasing pressure to offer a demonstration of its core beliefs on the basis of publicly accepted and universally accessible criteria – such as an appeal to nature and reason.

The “Age of Reason” tended to the view that the meaning of the term “nature” was self-evident. In part, the cultural triumph of the rationalist approach to natural theology in the eighteenth century rested on a general inherited consensus that “nature” designated a reasonably well-defined entity, capable of buttressing philosophical and theological reflection without being dependent on any preconceived or privileged religious ideas. The somewhat

generic notions of “natural religion” or “religion of nature,” which became significant around this time, are themselves grounded in the notion of a universal, objective natural realm, open to public scrutiny and interpretation.[13]

It is easy to understand the basis of such a widespread appeal to nature in the eighteenth century. On the one hand, Enlightenment writers looking for a secure universal foundation of knowledge, free of political manipulation or ecclesiastical influence, regarded nature as a potentially pure and unsullied source of natural wisdom.[14] On the other, Christian apologists anxious to meet increasing public skepticism about the reliability of the Bible as a source of divine revelation were able to shore up traditional beliefs concerning God through an appeal to nature.[15]

Relatively recent developments, however, have undermined the foundations of this older approach. Critical historical scholarship has suggested that the Enlightenment is more variegated and heterogeneous than an earlier generation of scholars believed,[16] making it problematic to speak of “an Enlightenment natural theology,” as if this designated a single, well-defined entity. It is increasingly clear that the Enlightenment itself mandated a number of approaches to nature, even if these share some common themes.

Perhaps more significantly, the notion of “nature” proves to be rather more fluid than the Enlightenment appreciated. An extended engagement with the natural world leads to the insight that the terms “nature” and “the natural,” far from referring to objective, autonomous entities, are conceptually malleable notions, patient of multiple interpretations – none of which is self-evident. Since World War II, there has been an increasing awareness that “nature” is essentially a constructed concept.[17] Concepts of nature and the natural – note the deliberate use of the

plural – are themselves the outcome of a process of interpretation and evaluation, influenced by the social situation, vested interests, and agendas of those with power and status.[18] In the twentieth century, prevalent and influential ways of "seeing" nature have included:

- Nature as a mindless force, causing inconvenience to humanity, and demanding to be tamed;
- Nature as an open-air gymnasium, offering leisure and sports facilities to affluent individuals who want to demonstrate their sporting prowess;
- Nature as a wild kingdom, encouraging scuba-diving, hiking, and hunting;
- Nature as a supply depot – an aging and increasingly reluctant provider which produces (although with growing difficulty) minerals, water, food, and other services for humanity.[19]

These views of nature are not simply different; they are inconsistent with each other, their respective accentuations reflecting the different agendas of those who devised them in the first place. Nature, far from being a constant, robust, autonomous entity, is an intellectually plastic notion. Definitions of nature may well tell us more about those who define it than what it is in itself.[20]

Natural Theology is an Empirical Discipline

One of the distinctive features of our approach to natural theology is the view that, while philosophical and theological reflection on the issues attending it are important, *empirical* questions cannot be avoided. For example, consider James Barr's excellent summary of traditional definitions of 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 made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible.[21]

This account provokes several fundamental and related questions about *nature* in general, and about *human nature* in particular. What does it mean “just” to be “human beings”? How can “knowledge of God” be calibrated? How can the “capacity” for an “awareness of God” be explored? And what are the implications for the reformulation of a natural theology?

These are questions about human psychology at least as much as they are questions of systematic theology or metaphysics. In this book, we shall take the psychological perspectives of this matter with the greatest seriousness, considering the processes by which human beings make sense of their environments. The influence of Enlightenment rationalism until recently has been such that natural theology has been understood primarily as an exercise in which human observers were able to read nature simply and objectively from a position of privilege. Yet the characteristic modernist notion that human observers are detached from nature has been called into question by the growing recognition in psychology that cognition is an embodied, situated activity of sense-making. Human beings are part of the natural order which they observe and interpret. Any notion of the “objectivity” of human interpretations of nature is undermined by the very nature of the psychological processes by which observation takes place. These considerations do not discredit the notion of natural theology itself; they do, however, cause severe difficulties

for the particular approach to natural theology which emerged during the period of the Enlightenment.

It is to be recognized that the human observer is not a passive spectator but an active interpreter of the natural world. A deepening understanding of the psychology of human cognition is the occasion for a retrieval of Judeo-Christian accounts of our engagement with the world which recognize that humanity actively constructs a vision of reality.[22] This is consistent with a "critical realist" epistemology, which affirms both the existence of an extra-mental reality and the active, constructive role of the observer in representing and interpreting it.[23] While this could be argued to be consistent with a social constructivist position, which holds that human subjectivity imposes itself on what we mistakenly believe to be objective,[24] critical realism insists that human thought is constrained and informed by an engagement with an external reality. Where social constructivism holds that the vision of reality that humans construct reflects the outcome of human autonomy and creativity, rather than any "order of things" within nature itself, our approach insists that the human attempt to make sense of things is shaped by the way things actually are.

A Christian Natural Theology Concerns the Christian God

The quest for a viable Christian natural theology can be positioned against a continuing cultural interest in the transcendent. In a penetrating analysis of the failure of the Enlightenment to eliminate religion in the West, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski argues that the renewal of interest in the transcendent is indicative of the inner contradictions and vulnerabilities within Western culture.

The “return of the sacred,” he argues, is a telling sign of the failure of the *ersatz* Enlightenment “religion of humanity,” in which a deficient “godlessness desperately attempts to replace the lost God with something else.”[25] Natural theology is to be set within this general cultural context of continuing interest and yearning for the transcendent. There is a widespread concern to engage with the empirical world of everyday experience in such a way that it can point to the existence of the transcendent, disclose its character, or possibly lead into its presence.

For the Christian this quickly leads to a further thought: does a quest for the transcendent through nature lead to the God of Christianity – a trinitarian God, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ? It is no idle question. As we shall see, the British philosopher Iris Murdoch insisted upon the foundational role of the transcendent in any attempt to sustain the notion of “the good” (pp. 291–2). Yet Murdoch regarded herself as an atheist. The quest for the transcendent does not necessarily entail belief in a god or plurality of gods.

Even those who do hold that the quest for the transcendent leads to belief in a single divinity would question whether this is necessarily to be identified with the God of Christianity. As we noted earlier, the Boyle lectures are widely regarded as the most significant public assertion of the “reasonableness” of Christianity in the early modern period. These lectures set out to demonstrate that there was a direct, publicly persuasive connection between nature and the Christian God in response to that age’s growing emphasis upon rationalism and its increasing suspicion of ecclesiastical authority.[26]

Yet by the end of the eighteenth century, the lectures were widely regarded as discredited. In part, this was due to growing skepticism concerning their intellectual merits. “As the eighteenth century progressed, the ‘reasonable’

Christianity of the Boyle lecturers came to look increasingly flimsy and vulnerable."[27] Yet perhaps more seriously, this approach seemed to have an inbuilt tendency to lead to heterodox, rather than orthodox, forms of Christianity.[28]

Thus, while we would argue that a Christian natural theology has the potential to shed light on the cultural phenomenon of the desire to find the transcendent in nature, it seems that the quest for the transcendent in nature has not automatically led to the Christian God.

In contrast, the present study adopts a specifically Christian approach to natural theology from the outset, anchoring it in the Christ event. This is a book about natural *Christian* theology, which interprets natural theology as something that is both historically located in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth and theologically interpreted by the church. This theology places the general questions about nature and human nature in the specific context of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As already noted, its central claim is that the Christ event renders all theology "natural" because in it the natural order is redeemed. The basis of such a "natural Christian theology" is ultimately the doctrine of the incarnation.

A Christian natural theology is thus undertaken on the basis of a Christian vision of God and nature, which are in turn focused on the person of Christ. This approach to natural theology allows nature to be "seen" in the light of the Christian tradition. That tradition raises certain significant questions concerning both the observer, and what is being observed. What if nature is "fallen" – to note a concern we shall consider in more detail later – so that its capacity to disclose God is diminished or distorted? Or if human observers and interpreters of nature share its fallenness, entailing a double diminution or distortion of the glory of God? This point cannot be evaded by a selective reading of nature, which accentuates its beauty and

orderedness, while disregarding its more ugly, chaotic aspects, particularly as seen in natural evil and suffering. A robust theological framework is thus essential if nature is to be engaged with coherently as an entirety, rather than adopting a highly eclectic, piecemeal approach to its interpretation.

A Natural Theology is Incarnational, Not Dualist

Many traditional approaches to natural theology presuppose an essentially dualist framework. An implicit assumption of ontological bipolarity underlies the affirmation that the transcendent can be accessed via the mundane, the eternal through the temporal, or the supernatural through the natural. As Thomas F. Torrance has pointed out, such dualist assumptions are deeply ingrained within the Western theological tradition, and can be argued to reflect the influence of speculative Hellenistic philosophy rather than its original Jewish intellectual context.[29] Yet a Christian natural theology does not necessarily presuppose any such dualism or set of bipolarities. Nature and supernature are not to be thought of as two separate worlds, but as different expressions of the same reality.[30]

The Christian doctrine of the incarnation forces re-evaluation of such dichotomies, offering a new understanding of nature. As Greek patristic writers constantly emphasized, the pattern of creation, incarnation, and redemption was about the transformation of the entire category of the “natural,” not merely about the redemption and renewal of human nature as one element, however important, of that domain.[31] The doctrine of the incarnation affirms the capacity of the natural to disclose the divine, both on account of its status as the *divine creation*, and as

the object of *God's habitation*. This point was stressed by John of Damascus, in his controversy with those who held that material or physical objects could not be vehicles of divine disclosure or revelation.[32] God's decision to inhabit the material order in and through the incarnation affirms its God-bestowed – though not inevitable or automatic – capacity to reveal the divine.

Resonance, Not Proof: Natural Theology and Empirical Fit

As noted earlier, natural theology is widely understood to be "the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs" (William Alston).[33] Alston's definition clearly identifies the apologetic intention of traditional approaches to natural theology. As we noted earlier, the Boyle Lectures assumed that natural theology offered proofs for the existence of God. Starting from nature, the existence of God is invoked as the only way of making sense of what is observed. For many of the early Boyle lecturers, the complexity and beauty of the physical world could only be explained on the basis of the existence of a creator God. For William Paley, author of the highly influential *Natural Theology* (1802),[34] the close observation of the biological world demanded a similar conclusion. Nature was to be compared to a watch, whose complex mechanism pointed to the existence of a divine watchmaker. While some of these writers saw their arguments as constituting "proofs" for God's existence, they are perhaps better seen as a retrospective validation of belief in God. This point underlies John Henry Newman's lapidary remark: "I believe in design