

ALISTER MCGRATH**A Blast from the Past? The Boyle Lectures and Natural Theology**

In this first revived Boyle lecture, delivered at the church of St Mary-le-Bow, London, in February 2004, Professor John Haught provides a stimulating and reflective analysis of some of the difficulties that certain traditional approaches to natural theology encounter on account of the problematic dynamics of Darwinian evolution. Haught makes penetrating and persuasive criticisms of aspects of the thought of writers such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead. Space permits only a limited interaction with his splendid lecture. Instead of offering a detailed engagement with his analysis and proposal, I wish to stand back a little, and look at the broader issues that arise from his enjoyable and informative presentation.

Professor Haught sets out a vision for a ‘reconfiguration of natural theology after Darwin’ based on ‘nature’s narrative openness to the promise of an ever-renewing Future’. It is an approach that his readers will recall from one of his earlier works,¹ and one that merits continued attention. One of its features is the reworking of the traditional notion of providence, here understood as taking ‘the form not so much of design and fine-tuning as the perpetual dawning of a new future for the world’. Amplifying this point, Haught comments: ‘An infinitely compassionate and resourceful Future can be the ultimate redemptive repository of the entire series of cosmic occurrences no less than of those episodes that make up our individual lives.’

It is an important way of reading the somewhat melancholy picture of reality suggested by Darwinian accounts of the process of natural selection. And let us be frank: it is not the easiest of readings to defend, in the face of more economical alternatives. Richard Dawkins speaks for many when he argues that a Darwinian world has no goal or purpose, and we delude ourselves if we think otherwise. The universe is neither good nor evil, and cannot be considered to be moving towards any specific goal.²

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe had precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.

Dawkins may certainly be challenged on this, especially in relation to his

1 Haught, J. *The Promise of Nature*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993.

2 Dawkins, R. *River out of Eden : A Darwinian View of Life*. London: Phoenix (1995), p. 133.

flawed and problematic derivation of atheism from the natural sciences, including evolutionary biology.³ But his concerns, and the general anti-theistic world-view he constructs in response to his reading of things, are widespread in scientific culture and beyond. Hence the importance of Haught's lecture.

The question that Haught's stimulating lecture prompts me to ask is simply this: are Boyle Lectures actually such a good thing? Is it not the case that their approach has failed in the past, and will fail in the future? As this will seem to some readers to be a somewhat gloomy prognostication, I need to explain the concerns that I have long entertained about Boyle Lectures in the past.

In the year 2000, the first twenty-one Boyle lectures were republished in a facsimile edition.⁴ The lectures, delivered over the period 1692-1732, are widely regarded as the most significant public demonstration of the 'reasonableness' of Christianity in the early modern period, characterised by that era's growing emphasis upon rationalism and its increasing suspicion of ecclesiastical authority. These sermons occupy 1500 pages, spread over four volumes, and are an absolute delight to a historical theologian, such as myself. They provide a snapshot of a lost and bygone era, when it was still possible to offer a publicly persuasive 'confutation of atheism' – the title of the first series of Boyle Lectures, delivered in 1692 by Richard Bentley, which inaugurated the golden years of natural theology.⁵

In his substantial and important introduction to this reprint of the original Boyle lectures, Andrew Pyle – a distinguished intellectual historian of the seventeenth century⁶ – notes that the lectures signally failed in their objects.⁷ 'As the eighteenth century progressed, the "reasonable" Christianity of the Boyle lecturers came to look increasingly flimsy and vulnerable.' Their abandonment was inevitable; they had had their day, and had come to be a liability rather than an asset to the apologetic task of the church. Far from persuading their audiences of the intellectual robustness of the Christian faith, they had come to sow the seeds of doubt.

The 'natural theology' that the Boyle Lectures sought to commend is that which William Alston defines as 'the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any

3 See McGrath, A. E. *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Blackwell (2004), especially pp. 49-81.

4 *The Boyle Lectures (1692-1732): A Defence of Natural and Revealed Religion, being an Abridgement of the Sermons preached at the Lectures founded by Robert Boyle*. 4 vols. Bristol: Thoemmes Press (2000).

5 Gascoigne, J. 'From Bentley to the Victorians: The Rise and Fall of British Newtonian Natural Theology', *Science in Context* 2 (1988): 219-56. See also Berman, D. *A History of Atheism in Britain*, London: Routledge (1988), pp. 1-47.

6 See especially his excellent *Dictionary of Seventeenth-Century British Philosophers*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press (2000).

7 Pyle, A. 'Introduction', in *The Boyle Lectures*, vol. 1, vii – liii.

religious beliefs'.⁸ Natural theology, in this sense of the term, is a means of finding one's way to religious belief through reflection on the natural order. It began to blossom in England during the seventeenth century, partly in response to political and intellectual developments which had created unease, occasionally suspicion, of traditional Christian approaches to revelation.

Several factors appear to have shaped this new interest in 'natural theology' (often referred to as 'physical theology', from the Greek *physis* = nature) and 'natural religion'.⁹ We may note three. First, the rise of biblical criticism called into question the reliability or intelligibility of Scripture, and hence generated interest in the revelatory capacities of the natural world. Secondly, a growing distrust of ecclesiastical authority, which led some to explore sources of knowledge which were seen to be independent of ecclesiastical control, such as an appeal to reason or to the natural order. Thirdly, a dislike of organised religion and Christian doctrines caused many to seek for a simpler 'religion of nature', in which nature was valued as a source of revelation. All three factors remain significant today, and may even have been given added weight through the rise of post-modernity. So should we welcome the revival of natural theology?

I think we need to be cautious here, and appreciate the substantial differences that exist between the era of the original Boyle lectures and our own situation. The rise of the Newtonian world-view gave natural theology a new lease of life, as the original Boyle lectures make clear. This led to a new interest in a specific form of natural theology which went far beyond anything known to the first sixteen centuries of Christian theological reflections. Yet this renewal proved to be temporary, rather than permanent. Initially, the apologetic prospects for this approach seemed extremely positive. However, by the middle of the eighteenth century, there was growing concern about the approach. It was increasingly recognised as a dead end.

First, it seemed to lead to Deism, rather than to orthodox Christianity. Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation* (1730) argued that Christianity was nothing other than the 'republication of the religion of nature'. God is understood as the extension of accepted human ideas of justice, rationality and wisdom. This apologetic approach does not lead *away* from Christianity; nevertheless, it is certainly not well disposed towards Christian specifics. Alarmingly, some of the most influential Boyle lecturers were Arians, committed to a thoroughly rationalist understanding of Christ.¹⁰ The common sense underlying the 'natural theology' developed by William Whiston and Samuel Clark extended to their Christology. A second transition was therefore neces-

8 Alston, W. P. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1991), p. 289.

9 See works such as Westfall, R. S. 'The Scientific Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: A New World View' in Torrance, J. (ed.) *The Concept of Nature*, pp. 63-93. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1992).

10 Wiles, M. *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism Through the Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1996), pp. 62-134.

sary: from the God posited by natural theology to the rather more specific God revealed and proposed by Christianity.

Secondly, this approach to natural theology actually eroded the conceptual space traditionally occupied by God. The amalgam of Newtonian natural philosophy and certain forms of Anglican theology proved popular and plausible in post-revolutionary England. Nevertheless, it was an unstable amalgam. However, it was not long before the ‘estrangement of celestial mechanics and religion’ began to set in.¹¹ Celestial mechanics seemed to many to suggest that the world was a self-sustaining mechanism which had no need for divine governance or sustenance for its day-to-day operation.

This danger had been recognised at an early stage by one of Newton’s interpreters, Samuel Clark – himself a Boyle Lecturer.¹² In his correspondence with Leibniz, Clark expressed concern over the potential implications of the growing emphasis on the regularity of nature:¹³

The notion of the world’s being a great machine, going on without the interposition of God, as a clock continues to go on without the assistance of a clockmaker; is the notion of materialism and fate, and tends (under the pretence of making God a supramundane intelligence) to exclude providence, and God’s government in reality of the world.

The image of God as a ‘clockmaker’ (and the associated natural theology which appealed to the regularity of the world) was thus seen as potentially leading to a purely naturalist understanding of the universe, in which God had no continuing role to play. By the end of the eighteenth century, it seemed to many that natural theologies based on the Newtonian world-view probably led to atheism, heresy or agnosticism, rather than to authentic Christian faith. By 1750, it was becoming obvious that Newton’s synthesis of the physical sciences and religion had failed. Its death blow came when Percy Bysshe Shelley famously remarked that ‘the consistent Newtonian is necessarily an atheist’.¹⁴

An appeal to natural theology might therefore be argued, on historical grounds, to lead to a form of Christianity which seriously distorted the traditional orthodox understanding of the nature of God, and especially the critical issue of God’s continuing involvement in the world – in other words, the concept of providence. The term ‘deism’ now has strongly pejorative overtones to many Christian theologians. So does not an emphasis on natural theology risk

11 See the important study of Odom, H. H. ‘The Estrangement of Celestial Mechanics and Religion’. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966), 533-58.

12 His two courses of lectures were *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1704) and *The Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (1705). Both were published in 1706.

13 Alexander, H. G. *The Leibniz-Clark Correspondence*, Manchester: Manchester University Press (1956), p. 14.

14 Gascoigne, J. ‘From Bentley to the Victorians: The Rise and Fall of British Newtonian Natural Theology’ *Science in Context* 2 (1988): 219-56.

the introduction of a similar distortion today? An emphasis on natural theology has come to be associated with a mechanistic world-view and a significantly reduced conception of God, in which 'providence' is evacuated of much, if not all of its traditional meaning. This danger is clear from William Whiston's 1707 Boyle Lectures, which reinterpreted providence in terms of the regularity of the cosmic mechanism.¹⁵

Yet in the eighteenth century, natural theology underwent a new development. In the enthusiastic hands of William Paley, arguments once deployed in relation to the *physical* world were now given a new lease of life, by being transposed to the *biological* level. Paley's *Natural Theology; or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802) had a profound influence on popular English religious thought in the first half of the nineteenth century, and is known to have been read by Charles Darwin. Nature, Paley argues, shows signs of 'contrivance' – that is, purposeful design and fabrication. Nature bears witness to a series of biological structures which are 'contrived' – that is, constructed with a clear purpose in mind. 'Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature.' Indeed, Paley argues, nature shows an even greater degree of contrivance than the watch. He is at his best when dealing with the immensely complex structures of the human eye and heart, each of which can be described in mechanical terms. Anyone using a telescope, he points out, knows that the instrument was designed and manufactured. Who, he wonders, can look at the human eye, and fail to see that it also has a designer?

Yet Paley's vision of the specific manner in which God's creative activity was to be conceptualised caused far more difficulties than it solved. Before Darwin's new theory made its appearance, a growing body of informed theological opinion was urging the abandoning of his ideas, or their significant modification. In 1852, John Henry Newman was invited to give a series of lectures in Dublin on 'the idea of a university'. This allowed him to explore the relation between Christianity and the sciences, and especially the 'physical theology' of William Paley. Newman was scathing about Paley's approach, lambasting it as 'a false gospel'. Far from being an advance on the more modest apologetic approaches adopted by the early church, it represented a degradation of those views.

The nub of Newman's criticism of Paley's natural theology can be summarised in a sentence: 'It has been taken out of its place, has been put too prominently forward, and thereby has almost been used as an instrument against Christianity.'¹⁶ Paley's 'physical theology' was a liability, and ought to be abandoned before it discredited Christianity.¹⁷

15 See the important general discussion in Kubrin, D. C. 'Newton and the Cyclical Cosmos: Providence and the Mechanical Philosophy', *Journal for the History of Ideas* 28 (1967), 325-46.

16 Newman, J. H. *The Idea of a University*. London: Longmans, Green & Co, (1907), pp. 450-1.

17 Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

Physical Theology cannot, from the nature of the case, tell us one word about Christianity proper; it cannot be Christian, in any true sense, at all ... Nay, more than this; I do not hesitate to say that, taking men as they are, this so-called science tends, if it occupies the mind, to dispose it against Christianity.

Seven years before Darwin had subverted Paley's approach on scientific grounds through his theory of natural selection, Newman – widely regarded as the most important English theologian of the nineteenth century – had repudiated Paley as an outdated theological liability.

What is interesting is that there is no awareness on Newman's part of a new crisis of faith about to be precipitated by Darwin's work. His argument, which predates Darwin's *Origin of Species*, rests solely on his belief that Paley's approach fails in what it sought to deliver, and traps Christian theology in an apologetic which can only go disastrously wrong. It was not the first time that Christian apologetics had taken a disastrous wrong turn; an immediate correction was, in Newman's view, long overdue.

So my concern, broadly stated, is this: in developing a natural theology along the lines of the original Boyle lectures, are we just making life more difficult for Christian belief in today's very different situation? Have we created something that may achieve short-term gains, yet prove destructive in the longer term? To put this in a much more focused way: does a natural theology which makes an appeal to God's wisdom, perfection or goodness end up making the existence of imperfections within nature a disconfirmation of faith, where once it was little more than an anomaly or puzzle? And does not the Darwinian account of natural selection highlight the suffering, destructiveness and wastefulness of the natural order? Haught rightly notes the issues raised by Sir Charles Sherrington – issues which find their parallel in the writings of Darwin himself. An appeal from this suffering, struggling nature to a good God is intensely problematic.

So why adopt such an approach at all? Is not the appeal to nature as the grounds of existence of God so problematic and unpersuasive that it may do more than merely fail to convince thoughtful people of God's existence and goodness, and might actually persuade them otherwise? My own view, defended at length elsewhere,¹⁸ is that natural theology does have a role to play – but within the context of faith, not as an independent means to faith. I think that ultimately this is the approach that Haught himself prefers, given his specific appeals to aspects of the Christian revelation which are not widely regarded as part of 'natural religion' – namely, the 'descent of God' and the eschatological orientation of the Christian hope. Yet this presupposes that his dialogue partner shares these beliefs – in other words, has familiarity, and possibly even sympathy, with the Christian position.

18 McGrath, A. E. *A Scientific Theology: 1 – Nature*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark (2001), pp. 241-305.

In classical approaches to natural theology, no such assumptions are made. The appeal to nature itself is seen as a confirmation of the wisdom and goodness of a God, whose existence is intimated by reason and experience. It is well known that one of the most fundamental impulses leading to the development of the natural sciences in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the belief that to study nature at close quarters was to gain a deeper appreciation of the wisdom of God.¹⁹ As the great botanist John Ray (1628-1705) – author of the celebrated work *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (1691) – put it in 1660:

There is for a free man no occupation more worthy and delightful than to contemplate the beauteous works of nature and honour the infinite wisdom and goodness of God.

The rise of Darwinism has revealed the hidden cost of that beauty, and made that honouring somewhat more problematic.

Haught recognises this point, and seeks to engage with it in a number of ways. In particular, he makes the entirely correct point that Christian theology is not confronted with fundamentally new problems in dealing with the suffering associated with the ‘Darwinian recipe’; it is an extension of a familiar problem (natural suffering and animal pain) which theology has addressed in the past. Yet this ‘recipe’ undermines any Paleyesque attempt to argue from the present order of creation to God. The plausibility of Paley’s understanding of nature – which is basically a biological extension of Boyle’s appeal to the physical aspects of nature – is undermined by Darwinism. As Haught points out:

The idea of divine providence has generally been associated closely with a divine ‘plan’, ‘purpose’ or ‘design’, but there seems to be little in the Darwinian charting of life’s journey that corresponds to such cosy concepts. Cataloguing signs of divine design was the backbone of Robert Boyle’s natural theology and the famous lectures he endowed. But, were he here with us today, Boyle himself might agree that after Darwin any natural theology built solely or primarily on the notion of design is hardly destined to prosper.

For such reasons, Haught recommends that we reconceive natural theology. We must not limit our reflections to the apparent design of the present natural order, but also look forward to its transformation. ‘Instead of focusing only on the fact of living design, which can be accounted for scientifically in terms of the Darwinian recipe, a revived natural theology will focus on nature’s openness to the future’. It is a suggestion that merits attention.

Nevertheless, I found Haught difficult to follow at this critical point. He offers us a twofold response, both incarnational and eschatological, which is set

19 For some reflections, see Brooke, J. H. *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991).

forth so briefly that it is difficult to understand, let alone assess, in this form. This, I suspect, is primarily due to severe truncation of a complex argument, which has been set out more fully elsewhere.²⁰ This means that the reader is confronted with superb pieces of rhetoric – such as ‘An infinitely compassionate and resourceful Future can be the ultimate redemptive repository of the entire series of cosmic occurrences no less than of those episodes that make up our individual lives’ – which is not sufficiently contextualised to allow its true meaning to be grasped. Yes, evolution may be said to ‘promise’, if we allow this anthropomorphism to pass unchallenged. Yet, if read in a certain way, this seems uncomfortably like Voltaire’s Dr Pangloss, who substitutes a somewhat uncritical natural optimism for a more robust doctrine of providence. I fully concur with Haught’s judgement that ‘Darwinian evolution itself may not provide suitable soil for a natural theology centred on intelligent design’; however, his somewhat more subtle and elusive alternative is difficult to grasp, due to the density of exposition.

I therefore recommend that readers of this article wishing for a fuller exposition of Haught’s views should read elsewhere in his writings, where they will find these bare bones fleshed out, using the image of a ‘self-emptying God’ who ‘participates fully in the world’s struggle and pain’.²¹

The picture of an incarnate God who suffers along with creation [affirms] that the agony of living beings is not undergone in isolation from the divine eternity, but is taken up everlastingly and redemptively into the very ‘lifestory’ of God.

It is a thoroughly incarnational, Trinitarian vision of God, which I respect and admire, which clearly offers Christians a framework by which they may view and even make limited sense of the complex Darwinian picture of an emergent, suffering world.

But herein lies my point. The original Boyle lectures were based on a direct appeal to the natural order, from which certain theistic conclusions were drawn on the basis of certain assumptions which might well be deemed to be common to all people. A natural theology, in Boyle’s sense of the term, is based on an appeal to nature and a set of shared communal assumptions which leads an audience to the Christian revelation. What Haught offers us is an appeal to nature and a very specifically *Christian* set of assumptions, through which nature is to be viewed. Boyle’s vision of natural theology is based on common sense; Haught argues – and surely rightly – that many specifically Christian ideas – including that of a suffering, incarnate God – are ‘offensive to our customary sense of what should pass muster as ultimate reality’.²² But, as writers

20 For example, see his careful analysis in Haught, *J. God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press (2001), pp. 1-56.

21 Haught, *J. op. cit.* [20] pp. 49-50.

22 Haught, *J. op. cit.* [20] p. 50.

from a wide variety of theological traditions have stressed, the belief that there is a creator God is widely dispersed within culture.²³ It is a truth of natural reason which forms a natural and obvious point of contact with the style of natural theology commended and practised in the early Boyle lectures. The doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation are not merely specific to Christianity; they are widely regarded as running contrary to natural reason.

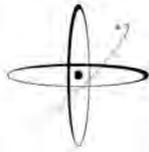
Haught and Boyle thus offer us very different visions of the nature and scope of natural theology, its intended audiences, its presuppositions, and its ultimate purpose. Haught's approach will make sense to those versed in and committed to the Christian tradition, and unfazed by its fundamentally counter-cultural notions such as a suffering God, the incarnation, and the Trinity – each of which, as an apologist, I know to be immensely problematic to modern western secular culture. If I might be forgiven for expressing myself in a rather cumbersome manner, it is necessary to lay a substantial apologetic foundation for the basis of Haught's approach, before that approach itself may serve an apologetic function. This is not natural theology as Boyle or his immediate successors understood it. That is not to say that it is not 'natural theology', still less to say that it is wrong – but it is not the same. Hence my question: is not the approach of Boyle now problematic? And is not the very different approach adopted by Haught a telling demonstration of this very fact?

I must conclude. While I have some reservations over the specific approach that Haught commends, I fully agree with his assessment of the importance of the challenge that we face, and his penetrating criticisms of some of the approaches developed to date. He has done us a great service, by addressing the real apologetic issues that emerge from a Darwinian understanding of the world, identifying some difficulties that we face, and setting out some valuable proposals for future development. He has initiated an important discussion, which is set to continue.

My lingering concern, as will have been clear throughout this paper, is whether the apologetic approach of the original Boyle Lectures serves any useful purpose today. For the historian, the approach of the Boyle lectures is historically conditioned by the political events and social anxieties of a bygone era. Perhaps we should allow our yesterdays to rest in peace, while we strategise about how best to engage the very different cultural situation the church faces in the west today. John Haught has done us a service through his challenge to do some rethinking about natural theology in a Darwinian age. Let us make sure it is done!

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²³ For example, think of John Calvin's insistence that knowledge of God the creator was common to all people, whether within the church or outside it: Dowey, E. A. *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, New York: Columbia University Press (1952).



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