

MICHAEL BYRNE

Guest Editorial

The Boyle Lectures at St Mary-le-Bow

When Robert Boyle died on the 31 December 1691 he left a term in his will which provided ‘Fifty Pounds per Annum for ever, or at least for a considerable number of years’ for the appointment of ‘any... learned Minister of the Gospel residing in the City of London ... to preach Eight Sermons in the Year, for proving the Christian Religion against notorious Infidels, viz. Atheists, Deists, Pagans, Jews and Mohometans; not descending to any Controversies that are among Christians themselves ... in such Church as the Trustees shall from time to time appoint’.

These Boyle Lectures began almost immediately after their founder’s death, with Richard Bentley preaching the first in the series on the 7 March 1692. They ran annually until 1732 and are known to have continued sporadically over the next ninety years. Thereafter the record of their existence becomes much less clear. We know that William Humphrey preached a set of Boyle Lectures at St Martin-in-the-Fields in 1857 and we also know that ‘Robert Boyle Lectures’ were held at Oxford between 1892 and 1934 and more recently at the Royal Dublin Society. But no Boyle Lectures are known to have been given in recent years, certainly none claiming continuity of theme and venue with the original Boyles.

Last year the Reverend George Bush, Rector of St Mary-le-Bow in the City of London, gave welcome encouragement to the suggestion that the Boyle Lectures might be revived at that church. St Mary-le-Bow was the venue at which many of the original Boyle Lectures had been given (or, in the terminology of the day, ‘preached’). St Mary’s is perhaps better known as ‘Bow Bells’ church; anyone born within the sound of its famous bells can consider themselves a true cockney. It was founded in 1070 on Cheapside, for many centuries the main thoroughfare of the City of London. It was rebuilt many times, most famously in the 1670s by Sir Christopher Wren after it was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666, and again by Lawrence King in the 1950s and 60s after suffering extensive bomb damage during the war. But following the great exodus of residential population from the City during the nineteenth century, the City churches have had to adapt their mission to continue serving the needs of Christians and those interested in Christianity in new and more accessible ways. St Mary’s is now a weekday church whose ‘parishioners’ usually live elsewhere but come to church there because they work nearby. It seemed an appropriate place at which some theological discussion could be offered in the City, particularly (given St Mary-le-Bow’s historic association with the first Boyle Lectures) theology which recognises the importance of engaging with the insights of contemporary science.

A further motive was more personal. I had read John F. Haught's *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Westview Press, 2000) soon after its publication. Few subjects have been as fraught for certain forms of Christian theology as Darwinian evolution but *God After Darwin* stresses the *opportunity* which evolution offers for developing a deeper understanding of the Christian idea of 'creation'. We decided to ask Jack Haught if he would come to London to deliver the first in a new series of Boyle Lectures and he immediately said 'yes'. We also asked the Bishop of London, Dr Richard Chartres, if he would respond to the lecture and he very kindly agreed to do so. We then asked two of the City Livery companies with which St Mary's is associated – the Grocers' Company and the Mercers' Company – if they could provide some financial assistance. They responded with characteristic generosity.

Professor Haught's lecture appears in this edition of *Science and Christian Belief*. One of those responding here is Professor Simon Conway Morris who is in fact the Boyle Lecturer for 2005.¹ In choosing Boyle Lecturers the trustees have been particularly keen to invite distinguished theologians and scientists who are interested in exploring the relationship between theistic belief generally (and Christianity specifically) and our current scientific culture and worldview, in which Darwinian evolution plays such an important role.² This of course is the essence of what Robert Boyle himself wanted when he set up his original lectures over three hundred years ago.

Neither science nor theology is ever practised in a vacuum; there is always a context within which such researches are pursued. The social, political and theological context of the original Boyle Lectures has been discussed by a number of authors including Margaret Jacob in her account of *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720* (Cornell University Press, 1989). Jacob's account has been widely debated and equally widely disputed but it remains beyond contention that late seventeenth-century England was in significant political upheaval. The century had witnessed – to name only its key political milestones – the transition from the Tudors to the Stuarts, Civil War, regicide, Commonwealth, Restoration, the flight of James II, and the Glorious Revolution. The worlds of philosophy and theology were undergoing much the same kind of radical transition at this time. The Royal Society had been founded in 1660; the new experimental philosophy was now in full flow; and Newton's *Principia* of 1687 marked a revolution in science no less significant than the *political* revolution which was to reach a climax in the Bill of Rights two years later.

1. Professor Conway Morris's theme for 2005 is 'Darwin's Compass: How Evolution Discovers the Song of Creation'. The response comes from Professor Keith Ward.

2. The trustees of the Boyle Lectures are the Earl of Cork and Orrery, the Bishop of London (Dr Richard Chartres), Alderman Sir Brian Jenkins, the Revd Dr John Polkinghorne, David Vermont (representing The Mercers' Company), Julian Tregoning (representing The Grocers' Company), the Rector of St Mary-le-Bow (the Revd George R Bush) and Dr Michael Byrne.

The established church was also polarised between (Tory) High-Churchmen who could not accept that a divinely-appointed monarch should be rejected, even if he was a Catholic, and (Whig) Latitudinarians who rejoiced at the arrival of William and Mary and showed an equal willingness to embrace Newtonianism because (in Margaret Jacob's controversial reading) of the potential for reconciling divine and social order which they read into that philosophy. As such the Boyle Lectures were an important Latitudinarian initiative. Quite why they went into eclipse after 1732 remains another subject for debate. Andrew Pyle has argued that the demise of the original Boyle Lectures may have become inevitable once significant problems began to emerge in reconciling Newtonianism with traditional Christianity:

High Churchmen objected that the diluted version of Christianity thus produced was little better than the deism the Boyle Lectures were supposed to be attacking; deists argued that although Nature does provide evidence of intelligent divine design, the supposed historical evidence for the Christian revelation will not stand close scrutiny. As the eighteenth century progressed, the 'reasonable' Christianity of the Boyle Lectures came to look increasingly flimsy and vulnerable.³

But other explanations can be suggested for the demise of the Boyle Lectures: perhaps they had in fact *achieved* their original purpose – defeating atheism (for the time being at least) – and as such they were no longer 'needed' by the 1730s. Whatever the reasons for the initial success and ultimate demise of the original series, the new Boyle Lectures begin in a social, political, philosophical and theological environment which is no less complicated than that which characterised the age of Robert Boyle. These complications will undoubtedly persist but we hope that what has now been restarted at St Mary-le-Bow will help interested Christians in the City of London and beyond, no less than interested readers of this journal, to tease out some of the key points which arise from those controversies and to decide how to respond to them.

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3. Pyle, Andrew *The Boyle Lectures (1692-1732)*, Continuum (2000).