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Natural Theology Reconsidered (Again)¹

Russell Re Manning

Bath Spa University, UK

‘Nothing is more disastrous for the theologian himself and more despicable to those whom he wants to convince than a theology of self-certainty.’²

I. Introduction: Reconsidering Natural Theology (Again)

In this article 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 Boyle 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 was the increasing ‘specialisation’ of Christian theology in the attempts, characteristic of the 19th and 20th centuries, by theologians to establish an unambiguous subject matter for theology: initially through the notion of faith

¹ This article is a revised version of a talk with the same title delivered as the 2015 Boyle Lecture at the Church of St Mary-le-Bow, City of London on 25 February 2015. I am grateful to the Convenor, Dr Michael Byrne and the Trustees for the kind invitation to deliver the lecture and to the Revd George Bush and The Worshipful Company of Grocers for the warmth and generosity of their reception. I am also grateful to Dr Louise Hickman, Newman University, Birmingham, who gave an insightful response to the original lecture.

² Paul Tillich, ‘The Theologian’ in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (London: SCM Press, 1949), p.125.

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 an indication as to why 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.³ 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 seems to be to us as we encounter it are not merely self-contained but rather tell us something, however imprecise,

³ See Helen de Cruz and Johan de Smedt, *A Natural History of Natural Theology. The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

uncertain and incomplete about ultimate reality, or, 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, both religious and non-religious.

What the evidence of this empirical 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.’⁴

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

⁴James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 1.

(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 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'?⁵ 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.'⁶ 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 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

⁵Tertullian, *Heretics* 7.

⁶Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* 2nd edn. (Routledge, 2001).

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.⁷

To make a little more sense of this suggestion, let me turn, for a moment, in Werner Jaeger's words, to 'the origin of natural theology and the Greeks'.⁸ As Jaeger 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"'.⁹

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 (*to olon, to pan*)'.¹⁰ 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

⁷ For a collection that attempts to engage the breadth of natural theology from a variety of perspectives (historical, religious, philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic-cultural), see Russell Re Manning, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁸ 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 had this alternative title.

⁹ Jaeger (1947), 172.

¹⁰ Jaeger (1947), 173.

an engagement with nature; it is, Jaeger declares, a 'fact that whenever the Greeks experienced the Divine, they always had their eyes on reality.'¹¹ 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.'¹²

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.¹³ Augustine cites Varro's description:

'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

¹¹Jaeger (1947), 173.

¹²Jaeger (1947), 4.

¹³Augustine, *City of God*, VI.5.

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*).¹⁴

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....

¹⁴Augustine, *City of God*, VI.5.

So then, neither by the fabulous not by the civil theology does any one obtain eternal life.....Both are base; both are damnable.'¹⁵

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 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 (including a twenty-first century scientific naturalist). Such a natural theology is the culmination of a 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

¹⁵Augustine, *City of God*, VI.6.

this visible universe be whispering out the notions of a Deity.' Yet, as Smith continues, 'we cannot understand it without some interpreter within,'¹⁶ namely human reason, or *logos* – that disclosive power that gives confidence that these speculations whilst always risky 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'.¹⁷ 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' 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' to name the two most obvious examples.¹⁸ 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

¹⁶John Smith, 'Discourse Of the Existence and Nature of God' in *Select Discourses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1859), p. 129.

¹⁷For an earlier version of this typology, see Russell Re Manning 'A Perspective on Natural Theology from Continental Philosophy' in Re Manning, *Oxford Handbook*, 262-275, 265-268.

¹⁸Anselm, 'Preface' to *Proslogion* in *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm with the Proslogion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1946), 1.2.1.

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. In this sense, far from natural theology, what might result from an engagement with the natural from the perspective of a faithful theology would be a 'theology of nature.'¹⁹

My central contention in raising this fourth type of theology is that faithful theologies are, from the outset undertaken on the basis of a commitment to a certain *ecclesiology*, rather than from 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.*²⁰

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 overstating the contrast, it is instructive to be reminded 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 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

¹⁹ This relates to, but crucially reformulates Ian Barbour's influential distinction between 'natural theology; and 'theology of nature' in Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Harper, 1997).

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, 'Phenomenology and Theology' in John D. Caputo (ed.), *The Religious* (Blackwell, 2002), p. 57.

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.²¹

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 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. Aquinas' point of departure is rather that of a faithful believer, whose *sacra doctrina* aims to treat 'all things...under the aspect of God' and which itself is subalternated to God's own knowledge of himself.²² 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

²¹Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (Routledge, 1946,1961), 453-4.

²² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.1.7

theology alone, to the 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 further, that such a project must 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. It is to this latter question 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, 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, not withstanding 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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, early modern natural theology represented 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

²³ John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion. Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁴ Buckley's argument is most comprehensively developed in his *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

game of rugby, so natural theology is a doomed enterprise – never truly natural nor truly theology. Instead, for Buckley, 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*.²⁵ 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 professed 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 enough whither 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 offered by James Barr, the natural theology of the original series of Boyle Lectures, for instance, by no means stood in opposition to its supposed poetic, civil, or indeed ‘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, for it

²⁵ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. And Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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 ways of thinking about 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 natural theology 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 the early modern period – as they always tend to be), 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 argument, 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 (or science) alone can suffice to provide knowledge of God without any reference to other sources – that are recognised (and condemned) as such. In other words, natural theology became reduced to those atypical forms that construed 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 went 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 adversary, the 'Father of liberal theology', F. D. E. 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 to be subordinated to faith, such that the 'father of liberal theology' seems to have had more in common with that most dramatically 'faithful' of the 19th century theologians, Soren Kierkegaard, than he did with his contemporary, great rival and proponent of a synthetic form of natural theology, G. W. F. Hegel.

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

V. The Strange Persistence of Natural Theology

Throughout this article 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, by the scientific revolution; nor indeed, as Buckley suggests, that it originated with the emergence of early modern natural philosophy. It is undeniable that natural theology was indeed side-lined in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a result of the consensus turn to theological positivism in theology's search for disciplinary purity. And yet throughout the same period natural theology's 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.

Whilst marginalised, however, natural theology never really went away and continued to develop, frequently in some surprising situations. For example natural theologies are found in the works of the German Idealists, Hegel Schelling, and their English co-conspirator, S. T. Coleridge, as well as with the reforming theologians of *Lux Mundi*. That there was so much more to 19th 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 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.²⁶

One further compelling example of the persistent yet transformed presence of natural theology late into the 20th century is Paul Tillich and his radical reformulation of the very task of theology away from dogmatics to what he called 'theology of culture'. Whilst Tillich explicitly rejected any appeals to 'nature' for his constructive theology, his reticence was not a rejection of the logic and aspirations of Varronian natural theology, but instead a (more) 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

²⁶ See Douglas Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion. Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

of the most developed natural theologies of the 20th 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.'²⁷

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 will lie. 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 would surely hinder its future, if it were only here that we looked 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 combatting 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

²⁷ See *inter alia* the essays in Russell Re Manning, ed., *Retrieving the Radical Tillich. His Legacy and Contemporary Importance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

committed to a view of natural theology that permits it a place, but only on condition that it take that place securely within, and explicitly subordinated to, 'faithful' theology. Both 2014 and 2016 Boyle Lecturers (Alister McGrath and Sarah Coakley) are typical of this tendency.²⁸ Whilst both have very different projects and reasons for recalling natural theology as part of their work, both also 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. I suggest that the future of natural theology will be the cautious and humble attempts 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 will aim to respond to the 'rumour of angels' (in Peter L. Berger's famous phrase) that puts 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.

²⁸ See Alister McGrath, *The Open Secret. A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) and Sarah Coakley, 'Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God' 2012 Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen, forthcoming from Oxford University Press, 2017. Their respective Boyle Lectures are available at <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/series/the-boyle-lectures/>.