

## Christians in Science Summer 2012 Student Essay Competition

### *Second Place Essay*

## **The Heavens Declare: Natural Theology and our Desire for the Transcendent**

**Tim Middleton, August 2012**

*“Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world.”<sup>1</sup>*

C. S. Lewis was right: we all seem to be hungry for something more. Our day-to-day lives may be palatable, even enjoyable, but we are invariably left with a lingering sense of unfulfillment. We worry about purpose; we look for meaning; and we are concerned about how we should live.

In parallel with our innermost longings we also find ourselves inhabiting a world that suggests there is something more, be it the awe-inspiring view across a snow-capped mountain range or a chance meeting with an old friend. We sense something bigger than ourselves; something more perfect than ourselves; and something beyond our control. So what are we to make of these hints and desires?

This is the realm of natural theology. For some, it is knowledge of God by appeal to human reason; for others, it is apprehension of the divine by engagement with the natural world. These two strands—both internal provocation and external stimulus—can both contribute to natural theology. James Barr provides a helpful definition in his 1991 Gifford Lectures: “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”.<sup>2</sup>

For Christians, natural theology clearly follows from what Saint Paul writes to the Romans, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made”.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, natural theology has suffered a rough ride within the Christian tradition. Medieval thinkers were at home with an allegorical reading of the world around them: a lion, for example, was seen as the figure of Christ. Following the Enlightenment, William Paley’s seminal work of 1802, *Natural Theology*, attempted to deductively prove God’s existence from the facts of nature. Few Christians today believe that such ‘proofs’ are possible, but unfortunately many modern secularists have leapt on such ideas as straw men for their own rebuttals of theism.<sup>4</sup> The Protestant theologian Karl Barth is also noted for

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 3, Chapter 10

<sup>2</sup> James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, Chapter 1, based on his 1991 Gifford Lectures

<sup>3</sup> Romans 1:20, New International Version

<sup>4</sup> For example, Simon Blackburn, *Think*, Chapter 5

being particularly critical of Paley's type of natural theology. He argues that it subverts divine revelation: who are we to attempt to build a bottom-up notion of God? However, if we see natural theology as a divine self-revelation to which humanity must respond rather than an anthropocentric Tower of Babel, then Barth's concerns can be laid to rest.

Recently, natural theology has seen something of a revival, aided by a number of scientific ideas, including: the apparent fine-tuning of the universe uncovered by modern cosmology; the numerous examples of convergence in evolutionary biology; the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in the physical sciences; and even the very intelligibility of the world around us. But these observations provide pointers towards, rather than proofs of, God; they are mysteries to be pondered rather than arguments to hand to sceptics. In his 2009 Gifford Lectures, Alister McGrath argues that, "Christian theology provides a *schema* or interpretative framework by which nature may be 'seen' in a way that enables and authorises it to connect with the transcendent."<sup>5</sup> In other words, observations of the world we inhabit resonate strongly with a Christian outlook, but they shouldn't form the basis for belief.

McGrath is correct, but he also misses an interesting question: what, then, is the secular world to do with the hints and desires of something more? Popular philosopher and atheist Alain de Botton argues for the importance of something beyond ourselves in his recent book *Religion for Atheists*: "The signal danger of life in a godless society is that it lacks reminders of the transcendent and therefore leaves us unprepared for disappointment and eventual annihilation."<sup>6</sup> This is reflected in sociological surveys. For example, Elaine Howard Ecklund has published results on the beliefs of US scientists showing that as many as twenty percent fall into the category of "spiritual but not religious".<sup>7</sup>

McGrath notes that, "The quest for meaning transcends historical and cultural boundaries,"<sup>8</sup> but what his vision of natural theology lacks by insistence on looking through a Christian lens is what Thomas Browne described as, "a universal and public manuscript".<sup>9</sup> Psalm 19 famously proclaims that, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."<sup>10</sup> Crucially, though, the psalmist goes on to insist on the universality of this natural theology: "There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."<sup>11</sup>

Everyone possesses inner desires and everyone inhabits the same external world—two truly emancipating facets of human experience. The democratising nature of these experiences help, in part, to address the "scandal of particularity" faced by revealed religion alone. This

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<sup>5</sup> Alister McGrath, 2009 Gifford Lectures, Lecture 1

<sup>6</sup> Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*, p.200

<sup>7</sup> As discussed in her book *Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think*

<sup>8</sup> Alister McGrath, 2009 Gifford Lectures, Lecture 1

<sup>9</sup> As quoted by Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind*, Chapter 7, p.207

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 19:1, New International Version

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 19:3-4, New International Version

is not to deny that a Christian worldview resonates strongly with certain natural theologies, merely to suggest that the very basic building blocks of theism are latently present in all of us. Natural theology is not a combative tool for apologetics, but a humble observation that we have much in common with our fellow human beings.

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