
Natural Theology as Contextual, Political, and Public

At its most basic, natural theology is about the “God question,” that is, the question of the existence and attributes of a presumed divine being. As a “natural” theology, it does not seek to draw upon any particular religious tradition or revelation (which, after all, would be circular), but rather works from some account of human reasoning, with a degree of public accountability, in dialogue with the other products of (nonreligious) human reasoning. While I am a Christian and Catholic theologian, this is not a work in Christian or Catholic theology per se, though it does rework themes drawn from within the Christian tradition. Nor is it a theology of “nature” or the “natural world.” Though it is interested in what science tells us about the natural world, it is as interested in what the very activity of science itself tells us about the nature of human intelligence and reason that drive science, and the implications this activity has about reality.

These are some of the resources that a “natural” theology will draw upon in addressing the God question.

Still, a question is never an abstraction; it arises in a context. The context of the God question today is very different from that of many of the great figures—such as Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas—who have sought to address it in the past. Nor is it just an intellectual question, a matter of mere curiosity for the idle minds of philosophers and theologians. It is an existential and indeed a political question with profound personal and social consequences. Western societies have undergone a progressive secularization, the increasing exclusion of religion from the public square. Some of this exclusion has been pragmatic, carving out a space free from religious disputation to allow for social harmony among competing religious claims. Some has been ideological, driven by a desire to limit religion to the private sphere, to make of religious belief a purely internal commitment with no possibility of extending its claims into a public arena dominated by reason alone. The public claims of reason are then to be contrasted with the private, and possibly irrational (or at best a-rational), beliefs of religious traditions.

This context has taken on a sharper edge with the emergence of the so-called new atheism, steered by the leading lights of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.¹ This new breed of atheists has taken atheism out of the confines of academic philosophical debates and onto the streets, holding international atheist conventions that attract people from around the world in a global “celebration of reason.”² This movement is not concerned with polite intellectual disagreement, but more with street brawling or trench warfare, as anyone who has entered the world of online publishing and blogging

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, 1st ed. (New York: Twelve, 2007)

2. Two such international conventions have been held in Melbourne Australia, in 2011 and 2012. Richard Dawkins was a keynote speaker at both.

can attest.³ Online, the gloves are off and religious positions and beliefs are mercilessly pilloried as ignorant, irrational, unscientific, and dangerous. As the not-so-subtle subtitle of Hitchens book suggests, “Religion poisons *everything*.”

It seems clear that the background to this overt display of anger is public perception of the rise of militant Islam.⁴ While hardly representative of Islam more broadly, this movement, especially in light of the terrorist acts of 9/11, has significantly raised the temperature surrounding the God question. Islamic belief stands in some tension with the assumptions present in the secularizing West; in Islam, religious belief is expected to be expressed in appropriate dress codes and public actions. Islam has its own legal and economic traditions, which may be in conflict with legal and economic traditions in the West. In some ways, Islam raises the specter of a history that the West has rejected, not without good reason, of basing a society on religious beliefs. The prospect of an “Islamic state” recalls the ghosts of Christendom in the West and becomes a looming threat of a renewed theocracy. In such a context, the status of natural theology as a form of political theology becomes more evident. If God’s existence is viewed as not only compatible with reason, but as even mandated by reason, where does that leave the agenda of secularization? And what alternatives can one envisage to Christendom or Islamic theocracy if God’s existence is acknowledged in the public realm?

There is a broader cultural context, which has been mapped out in some detail in the work of Charles Taylor. Taylor begins his book

3. See Alister E. McGrath, *Why God Won’t Go Away: Is the New Atheism Running on Empty?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010) for an account of this online world of atheism.

4. For example, in a 2003 interview, “Hitchens said that the events of September 11th filled him with ‘exhilaration.’” See Ian Parker “He Knew He Was Right: How a former socialist became the Iraq war’s fiercest defender,” *The New Yorker* (October 16, 2006), available at http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/10/16/061016fa_fact_parker?currentPage=all.

A Secular Age with a carefully nuanced account of secularization, distinguishing three distinct meanings that can be given to the term: secularization as (1) the withdrawal of God from “public spaces,” for example through the separation of church and state; (2) a decline in religious practice; and (3) “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”⁵ As Taylor notes, a society can be secular in the sense of (1) but still have relatively high rates of religious practice, as for example in the United States, and so not display secularization in the sense of (2). However, what is of most concern for his analysis is the third sense: “The change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one possibility among others. . . . Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.”⁶

The third sense is the one of most interest to the project of natural theology: this movement from a world where the existence of God was taken for granted to a world where it is just one possibility among others, and not necessarily the easiest stance to maintain intellectually. For Taylor, the most significant factor in this shift is not the rise of modern science, contra the claims of many of the new atheists, but the movement to what he calls an “immanent frame,” marked by a turn away from the outer world, leading to a growth in the vocabulary of interiority, of thought and feeling.⁷ The emergence of an immanent frame drives “a new form of religious life, more personal, committed, devoted,”⁸ but it also creates a new

5. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 3.

6. *Ibid.*, 3.

7. *Ibid.*, 539. Taylor’s account here has similarities with Lonergan’s notion of the “turn to the subject” and the emergence of a “third stage of meaning” grounded in human interiority.

8. *Ibid.*, 541.

distinction: “This frame constitutes a ‘natural’ order, to be contrasted to a ‘supernatural’ one, an ‘immanent’ world, over against a possible ‘transcendent one.’”⁹ This leads to the construction of a “closed world view” that methodologically excludes reference to the transcendent. While Taylor does not think that this is a necessary outcome of the emergence of the immanent frame, he does acknowledge that within such a worldview “the inference to the transcendent is at the extreme and most fragile end of a chain of inferences; it is the most epistemically questionable.”¹⁰

These are the challenges to be raised and faced in this book. It is not simply a work *in* natural theology so much as it is a work *about* natural theology and how it is to be conceived. Underlying it is the proposal that we reconceive of natural theology as contextual, public, and political—not as an exercise in intellectual gymnastics seeking to infer God’s existence “at the extreme and most fragile end of a chain of inferences,” but as a process where the very engagement is as important as the conclusions reached. As *contextual*, natural theology must recognize the intellectual context of its engagement against a background of broad cultural shifts of the type Taylor has identified. The context of Aquinas’s “five ways” is not the context of twenty-first-century Western culture. For one thing, the ability to recognize metaphysics as a distinct form of reasoning has all but vanished in our time, and we barely recognize the loss. As *public*, natural theology must grapple with the God question in ways that prescind from the particular faith commitments of our competing religious traditions and present the case for God in a way that is accessible to

9. *Ibid.*, 542. It is worth noting that Taylor’s use of the term *supernatural* here is conditioned by the emergence of the immanent frame. If the immanent frame prescribes the limits of the “natural,” then knowledge of God’s existence is necessarily supernatural in the sense of being beyond nature. Then natural theology becomes impossible. However, as Taylor notes, this construction of the immanent frame is only a “spin,” not a necessary outcome of the move to the subject.

10. *Ibid.*, 558.

public reason. Still, this might mean combating hegemonic claims, particularly those that would suggest that scientific reason is the only valid form of public reasoning. Finally, as *political*, natural theology has to explore the political implications of what it might mean for God's existence to be a publicly acknowledged fact, not avoiding concerns about theocracy or a new Christendom but arguing that public acknowledgment of God does not necessarily lead us down that road.

However, before undertaking this more extended project, we should get our bearings by considering some of the history and contexts of previous exercises in and debates about natural theology.

The Beginnings of Natural Theology

We can trace the beginnings of natural theology in the West to the emergence of philosophy in ancient Greece. The Greek discovery of mind and its potentialities had a profound impact on Western culture, but it was not a discovery that went without mishap. Socrates's persistent questioning of the Athenians brought about his demise, charged with corrupting the youth and disputing the existence of the gods. This is not to say that he did not believe in the existence of a God. Indeed, he developed a teleological argument, or argument from design, to seek to prove the existence of God. However, he did provide a solid philosophical critique of the religious beliefs of his day, seeking to eliminate their mythological aspects. Plato continued this approach, conceiving of a highest good that was the goal or purpose of human living. However, it is Plato's pupil Aristotle who is most famous for conceiving of God as an "unmoved mover," whose existence can explain all movement in the cosmos.¹¹

11. Aristotle, *Physics*, Book 8, 259a, in Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, Modern Library Classics (New York: Random House, 2009), 374–75.

It is important to note that these arguments toward the existence of God did not occur in the face of skepticism about belief in divine beings. Indeed, the Greek pantheon was full of gods and goddesses whose worship was an accepted aspect of the social order and whose capriciousness was mirrored by the leaders of Greek society. Cosmos and polis ran parallel to one another, ruled by passion and torn by conflict, the realm of the gods reflecting that of the social order. The discovery of mind by these ancient philosophers suggested a radically new principle for ordering society: an ordering according to the dictates of reason. And so both Plato and Aristotle produced new political visions and ethical reflections to guide human living. Within these reflections, God is not an extraneous addition but the principle that holds the whole together, the one whose existence makes sense of the rest of the structure.

Christianity would later take up some interest in questions of natural theology, reflecting in general on the apostle Paul's comments about the "pagans" in Rom. 1:19-20:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

However, it was not until the Middle Ages and the emergence of Scholasticism that the question took on a new energy. Again, the context is significant: there was a rediscovery of the works of Aristotle, through the mediation of Islamic scholars; new educational institutions, universities, were founded in Paris and Bologna; and there was a renewed confidence in the abilities of reason to know the world apart from the dictates of religious tradition. As with the era of the Greek philosophers, it was not a time of skepticism about the existence of God. Indeed, it was a highly religious era where

the Christian Church dominated social and cultural life. However, the new emphasis on reason raised questions about the relationship between God and the world. Does reason lead us to God, or away from God? Is reason a distinct source of authority from God, or does its authority derive from and serve divine authority? Aquinas's "five ways," perhaps the most famous contribution to natural theology in history, find their context in such questions. Not only does reason lead us to the existence of God, but human reason is a created participation in the divine reason, and so subservient to it. Faith and reason are harmonious allies in the pursuit of a genuinely religious life. We shall return to the issue of Aquinas's context in the next chapter.

Growing Skepticism about Reason

This synthesis between faith and reason was not to last. Late Scholastic emphasis on so-called universal concepts led to an increasing skepticism about the powers of reason, resulting in a widespread nominalism—the belief that the intellect only knows the names of things, not the things themselves. This philosophical skepticism bled over into the religious realm during the Reformation, leading to the rejection of the earlier project of natural theology. Luther was not taken so much with Rom. 1:19-20 as he was with Rom. 1:21: "for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened." The darkening of the mind due to the impact of original sin meant that reason could not be trusted to arrive at knowledge of the one true God. On this antinomy of faith and reason Luther proclaimed:

There is on earth among all dangers no more dangerous thing than a richly endowed and adroit reason, especially if she enters into spiritual

matters which concern the soul and God. . . . Reason must be . . . blinded, and destroyed. Faith must trample underfoot all reason, sense, and understanding, and whatever it sees it must put out of sight. . . . Whoever wants to be a Christian should tear the eyes out of his reason.¹²

Reason had become a seducer that would lead Christians into apostasy and heresy. Again, such a stance was not without its own context. The Catholic Church of the time had embraced all the excesses of the renewed humanism of the Renaissance and was wallowing in ecclesiastical corruption. If this is where a synthesis of faith and reason was to lead believers, one can understand why Luther might want to reject it.

This separation of faith and reason was to be given philosophical legitimacy by the work of Immanuel Kant. Spurred by the growing skepticism about the powers of reason articulated by the empiricist philosopher David Hume,¹³ Kant developed an elaborate philosophical response that sought to give legitimacy to speculative or “pure” reason in relation to the empirical world of science, while robbing it of legitimacy in relation to metaphysical questions such as the existence of God. He distinguished between *phenomena* (things-for-us) and *noumena* (things-in-themselves), arguing that while the mind can know *phenomena*, this being the basis for scientific discovery, *noumena* remained beyond the reach of reason. Kant effectively ruled metaphysics out of court, limiting human reason to the phenomenal world of sense:

12. Quoted in Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 75. Ironically, this quote is regularly referred to on atheist websites and can even be purchased emblazoned on a T-shirt.
13. David Hume was a Scottish Enlightenment philosopher and a key figure in British empiricism. His skepticism about knowledge led him to deny any grasp of causality. More famously, he argued against the credibility of any account of miracles. Kant claims that reading Hume awoke him from his “dogmatic slumber,” leading him to rethink his own position on cognition and metaphysics.

The light dove cleaving in free flight the thin air, whose resistance it feels, might imagine that her movements would be far more free and rapid in airless space. Just in the same way did Plato, abandoning the world of sense because of the narrow limits it sets to the understanding, venture upon the wings of ideas beyond it, into the void space of pure intellect. He did not reflect that he made no real progress by all his efforts; for he met with no resistance which might serve him for a support, as it were, whereon to rest, and on which he might apply his powers, in order to let the intellect acquire momentum for its progress.¹⁴

In particular, Kant declared three metaphysical truths to be beyond pure reason: the existence of God; the immortality of the soul; and the freedom of the will. He did argue, however, that these three truths were essential to practical reason, and that a reasoned ethics was impossible without them.

Kant was responding not just to Hume but to the growing success of the natural sciences in providing an explanatory account of the world. Isaac Newton and his successors had unraveled the secrets of planetary motion, solving problems that had puzzled humanity for millennia. Still, Newton conceived of his work as one of “natural philosophy,” raising the question of whether and how science, properly so-called, was distinct from metaphysics. Kant had provided the basis for such a distinction with the categories of phenomena and noumena, which sought to provide a philosophical grounding for the sciences while eliminating the possibility of metaphysics. Reason was indeed successful, but only in the scientific realm, not in the realm of things divine or metaphysical. Meanwhile, Kant’s ethics seemed to have a foot in both camps, seeking to be derived from practical reason alone, while evoking the above three principles from beyond pure reason as its basic requirements.

14. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1929, 1965), 48.

Of course, Kant would never deny the existence of God, just the validity of seeking to prove God's existence. One of his major works was his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.¹⁵ Whereas Luther sought to pit faith against reason to promote faith, the outcome of Kant's philosophy was to pit reason against faith, or at least the claims of revealed religion. All the religious truth we need is accessible to practical reason, and if it is not accessible, it is not important. Supernatural elements were not essential to his notion of religion unless they could be derived from the demands of practical reason, and so, for example, Kant saw no practical consequences to belief in the Trinity.¹⁶ Revealed religion did not enjoy the universality of reason that everyone possessed. Kant challenged his readers to "dare to think" without reliance on traditional authorities.¹⁷

Kant's work was enormously influential and remains an important backdrop to contemporary debates. In his work, we find questions that continue to be raised in debates between believers and atheists: the significance of the rise of modern science for religious belief; the possibility of distinguishing between science and metaphysics, indeed the very possibility of metaphysics distinct from science; and the relationship between reason, religion, and ethical reasoning. In one way or another, these questions continue to inhabit contemporary discussions on God, science, and morality.

15. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, ed. Allen Wood, George Di Giovanni, and Robert Merrihew Adams, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

16. *Ibid.*, 143.

17. In fact Kant's appeal to practical reason managed to incorporate many elements of Lutheran theology, such as doctrines of original sin, the *simul justus et peccator*, and imputed righteousness.