

Reviews

Russell Re Manning (ed.)
The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
 632pp. hb. £95. ISBN 978-0-19-955693-9

Is natural theology important? This may seem a strange question, but there are plenty of scholars from different disciplines who dismiss the subject as unworthy of attention. ‘New atheists’ such as Richard Dawkins provide a prime example, but even in his case it is never clear whether he thinks that there is no such subject, or whether there is, but it cannot provide any credible arguments to guide us from the world to God. Some would claim that his own arguments for atheism are themselves an exercise in natural theology, though of a negative kind. From a theological point of view, however, just as challenging are those theologians, such as Karl Barth, who regarded ‘natural’ theology with grave suspicion. There is quoted in this volume his dictum that ‘even if we only lend our little finger to natural theology, there necessarily follows the denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ’. This, though, seems far too sweeping. However crucial revelation may be, should not we be prepared in some way to receive it? Natural theology may explain why we could have a prior glimmering of understanding of God as, perhaps, the precondition of understanding the true nature of revelation.

This ‘Handbook’ is comprehensive in its treatment of natural theology, with thirty-eight original essays from experts in their various fields, many of them already well-known. Russell Re Manning has done a fine job in assembling an interesting collection and giving it a clear structure. Its authority is helped by the fact that John Hedley Brooke and Fraser Watts have acted

as consultant editors, and the result is a very judicious selection. The book is divided into sections, giving historical, theological, philosophical and scientific perspectives on natural theology. One complaint about natural theology in the present day could be that it is excessively orientated to modern science and this tendency is redressed by an unusual final section giving six essays on perspectives on the subject from the point of view of the arts. They include such topics as ‘Imagination and Natural Theology’ by Douglas Hedley of Cambridge, and even an article on ‘Natural Theology and Music’. Another distinctive slant in the volume is the way in which it does not restrict discussion to Christian natural theology. Interesting chapters are devoted not just to different Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox views of natural theology, but also Jewish and Islamic ones together with a chapter on Eastern Religions.

The collection covers everything from a lucid analysis of the nature of mathematical reality and its implications for natural theology by John Polkinghorne to a survey of feminist perspectives on natural theology by Pamela Sue Anderson, some of them having radical consequences for any traditional conception of God. The aim of the *Handbook* is to present natural theology, however understood, as a topic for serious academic consideration. It is not arguing for its importance, or making a plea for its revival. Indeed, a lesson from the various essays is that there is no need for such an argument as the subject is showing a surprising vitality in contemporary thought. There is much fascinating material from a wide variety of standpoints to be in found here, though it is a volume to be consulted and dipped into rather than read through as a continuous argument. The price of the book (£95) alone is enough to ensure that it

will not find itself on many private bookshelves but be a resource found in libraries. It is certainly a book that students can be referred to with confidence.

One fascinating question raised by a volume of this kind is where the limits of the discipline lie and which aspects of it deserve special emphasis. Principles of selection can always be challenged. In this case, the net has been cast very wide indeed, but one can still question whether some important strands of natural theology have been given the stress they deserve. There are chapters on Early Modern Theologies and on Protestant Perspectives. In both, though, there is no examination of the distinctive role of Anglican theology. Yet the English tradition of natural theology has been influential enough to warrant special attention. Its even-handed treatment of reason, Scripture and tradition has ensured a vital role for natural theology as the product of reason. Indeed, belittling any of the three could produce a distorted and unbalanced view of Christianity. From the historical point of view, English natural theology provided a vital background for the development of modern science. There is no reference to the Royal Society in the admittedly inadequate index of the book. Yet the seventeenth-century stress on natural theology provided an impetus for its foundation.

A contemporary issue deserving more attention is the argument over whether humans are naturally religious, 'born believers', and the implications of that. Is some knowledge of God accessible to all simply on the basis of being human? Even Calvin, as we are told in the chapter on Protestant Perspectives by Russell Re Manning, believed that we all have an inbuilt sense of the divine within us, a *sensus divinitatis*. Contemporary notions of the 'naturalness of religion', encouraged by the new discipline of the cognitive science of religion, are briefly touched on in Fraser Watts's interesting chapter on 'Sciences of the

Mind and Natural Theology'. This, though, is an issue we are likely to hear a lot more about in the future.

In his chapter on natural theology in the twentieth century Rodney Holder remarks that 'it would seem that for the Christian faith to be commended in the modern world, natural theology is vital.' Anyone who takes that lesson to heart will find this volume a superb mine of material for study and further reflection.

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Editor: Denis Alexander

Playwright: Craig Baxter

Preface: Stephen Hawking

The Isaac Newton Guide Book

Cambridge: Faraday Institute, 2012.

175pp. with DVD, hb. \$25.00. ISBN 978-0-9559074-1-8.

In 2009 Cambridge University celebrated its 800th anniversary and as part of that celebration the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion at St Edmund's College commissioned a play about the University's iconic scientist Sir Isaac Newton: *Let Newton Be!*, by Craig Baxter. Newton was not just a scientific genius of the highest order, however; he was also a deeply learned theologian and biblical scholar, alchemist, mathematician and natural philosopher, intimately concerned with the relationship between God, his creation and the human intellect.

The Isaac Newton Guide Book, which is beautifully produced and illustrated, breaks down into three interconnected parts. First, following introductory remarks by Denis Alexander, Stephen Hawking and Craig Baxter, come eight essays, opening up and examining key aspects of Newton's life and thought. Secondly, there is the printed text of the

play, with explanatory material; and thirdly, a performance on DVD.

Let us start with the play itself, launched in October 2009, in Newton's own Trinity College. The thirteen scenes of *Let Newton Be!* cover Sir Isaac's whole life, beginning retrospectively with the octogenarian Newton reminiscing while being tormented by kidney stones. The following scenes then proceed from childhood to his great creative work, being powerfully acted by a trio of players, each representing a stage of Newton's life: in youth, at the height of his powers, and as an elderly patriarch of science. Each 'age' is in constant interaction with the others, the three actors being on stage together for most of the time.

It is a beautifully-crafted story, the actors carrying their parts magnificently through a well-paced narrative, with great verve and vitality. There is, of course, the great science, but the script also looks at alchemy, the Leibniz controversy, Newton's bad lecturing performance and his theology. And in particular, it looks at how the widely-respected Bible scholar and Fellow of Trinity College wrestled with his own secret Arianism and came to see God as an all-powerful *singular* rather than a Trinitarian Being.

Scene 5, indeed, is so well acted that it makes one wince, as the 24-year-old Isaac uses leverage with a bodkin inserted into his eye socket to change the shape of his eyeball temporarily while he stared fixedly at the sun so as to see the 'phenomenon of colours'. No wonder he had to lock himself away in a dark room for three days to allow his eyesight to recover!

The entire script, moreover, is drawn from Newton's surviving published or manuscript writings and my warmest compliments go to Craig Baxter for crafting these often fragmentary statements into such a fine flowing narrative.

Each of the eight essays preceding the script is written by a recognised authority on the topic under discussion. The contributors are: Robert Iliffe (life), Michael Hunter (style of science), Stephen D. Snobelen (religious beliefs), Scott Mandelbrote (Bible scholar), Ben Newman (alchemist), Niccolò Guicciardini (dispute with Leibniz), John Hedley Brooke (science and religion) and Patricia Fara (Newton today).

All the essays are scholarly and very informative, but I was especially fascinated by those dealing with Newton's inner beliefs – in particular, the sources of his approach to biblical prophecy and his belief that Athanasius and his Early Church followers had 'corrupted' an older tradition in their imposition of Trinitarian ideas upon Christians (Snobelen and Mandelbrote); also changing perspectives and interpretation of Scripture, Providence and anthropocentric 'fine tuning' theology between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries (Hedley Brooke).

Newton's lifelong fascination with alchemy (also discussed in Scene 9 of the play) is put into a balanced historical context by Ben Newman. For in seventeenth-century scholarly culture, alchemy was *not* seen as a backward-looking, 'mad' pursuit for deranged occultists, as is still routinely trotted out by aficionados of 'the Enlightenment', but as a physical and spiritual quest about how mind and matter were constituted as part of the Divine Creation.

The Isaac Newton Guide Book is a valuable addition to our understanding of Newton, not simply as a 'herald of modern science', but as the truly complex figure that he was. And as the essays, play script and DVD all bring over, the *real* Newton, a man of profound if 'heretical' faith, is much more interesting than the cardboard cut-out genius on a pedestal.

Congratulations to Cambridge University and the Faraday Institute for

this most informative and entertaining production.

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Russell Stannard

Science and Belief: The Big Issues

Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2012. 176pp. pb.
£8.99 & \$14.95. ISBN 978-0-7459-5572-8
(also available in Kindle, epub and pdf formats)

This book is based on a twelve-episode series of videos of the same name that Russell Stannard together with BBC TV producer, Tony Coe, created for use in schools. The aim of the series was, in Stannard's words, 'not to try and make converts but to present ... impartially... the relevant background information and the arguments for and against belief. The overall purpose was to stimulate discussion of the questions raised and to allow each individual to make up their own mind on the issues.' (8) The book is intended to complement the video series and the Teachers' Notes that accompanied it, and to enable a more in-depth treatment of various science and belief issues. Each chapter covers a particular key issue in the debate and begins with a selection of statements, covering a range of viewpoints, by the young people who were interviewed for the videos. There then follows a short (10-20 pages) discussion of the particular topic and each chapter ends with some insightful questions, aimed at

provoking thought and discussion.

The book is divided into nine chapters and the material is arranged slightly differently from the videos. The chapters cover, respectively, Evolution and Genesis, Intelligent Design, Morality, Creation, The Anthropic Principle, Extraterrestrial Intelligence, Psychology, Miracles and The Relationship Between Science and Belief. Each chapter is succinct and well written, combining a wealth of scientific information simply explained with discussion of the questions that this poses for religious, particularly Christian, belief. Perhaps inevitably in a book of this size that tackles so many complex questions, the theological explanations that are interwoven with the science are the least compelling part of the material. They possibly assume too much knowledge of the Bible and Church Fathers and skate too quickly over issues of major importance in the Christian tradition (e.g., the chapter on creation finishes with the heat death of the universe, but makes no reference to the Christian belief in new creation). Nevertheless, this book is a welcome and accessible addition to the range of books offering introductory explorations of the science and religion debate. The style throughout the book is easy and intelligible with plenty of illustrations, and would be suitable for an 'Exploring science and belief' discussion group as well as for school students.

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