

Toward a New Natural Theology

JEREMY KIDWELL

ONE OF THE FEATURES of Jonathan's legacy which has always struck me has been his tendency towards holism, which resulted in a certain tenacity in trying to connect all the dots in our claims about God's being and our life together as God's people. I know for him this knowledge was anchored in his engagement with the work of Julian Hartt—particularly the notion he took from Hartt and developed further in his own theological reflection that God's work in creation and redemption are intertwined. Jonathan draws special attention to the consequences of our failure to reckon with this intertwining particularly in *God's Good World*. As Jonathan suggests, "One of the greatest tragedies of theology's neglect of creation has been the church's complicity in the destruction of the natural world and thus also of conditions that contribute to the flourishing of life."¹ He also drew attention, far earlier, to this same intertwining in terms of epistemology in talking about the doctrine of "humankind" in *A Primer For Christian Doctrine*.² Here Jonathan observed the tendency by theologians in the twentieth century to orient around either natural theology or biblical theology at the expense of the other. He goes on to observe, sagely, how all the things that humans experience, including God's creation and Scripture, are mediated through a process of interpretation, commending humility in theological reflection as we bear in mind

1. Jonathan R. Wilson, *God's Good World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 9.

2. Jonathan R. Wilson, *A Primer for Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 78–83.

the limitations and contingency of every human person and culture. I'm struck by the ways that Jonathan brings together holism and humility in the exhortations that ring out across that book: "We must instead bear witness to God's redemption of creation in word and deed—by caring for all creation, the whole person and the whole world."³

In reviewing the work that Jonathan has produced over a lifetime as I worked on this volume, I was struck by the massive shift in the issues which preoccupied Christian theology across the decades he has worked as a public theologian. In his early work, looking back upon the twentieth century and grappling—alongside other theologians like Stanley Hauerwas—with the legacies of the liberal theological project, he contended with the Christian flight from churches, cultural pluralism, biblical authority, pacifism, gender roles, and leadership. While it's not quite clear to me whether the church has gained much ground on these issues, a panoply of new ones has also come along to preoccupy contemporary theologians, including Jonathan in his most recent work: climate change, theological reflections on embodiment, Christian responses to anti-Black racism, and reflections on intersex conditions and gender identity.

I've always found Jonathan's scholarship to be a balm as I struggled (as a theologian trained in what was once called without irony an "evangelical" tradition) with the persistent anxiety, veering towards hostility, expressed by church leaders and theologians, towards the views of a so-called "secular world" and its attempts to revise our understanding of "nature" and what might be baptized as "natural" in terms of gender, sexual orientation, climate, and earth-system stability—and, in more implicit ways, racial superiority and privilege. Just over the past few years I've had Christians try to convince me that grassroots social movements protesting anti-black racism (that is, "Black Lives Matter") and climate change represent terrorist plots to overthrow government and social order. These movements, in spite of strong Christian presence among them, were seen by individuals as threatening a status quo or perceived norm, which in turn was perceived to be essential to social, economic, or political stability. As we look towards the increasingly sharp and sometimes violent rhetoric of contemporary Christians against critical race theory, climate change science and policy, and accommodations of non-cis-gendered people, I want to suggest that there is some linkage across these shared concerns. So much of the wariness that one can find

3. Wilson, *God's Good World*, 9–10.

Christians expressing today relates to this concern: should we adopt this revised view of what is “natural” or the consequences that cascade from that revision? As I will go on to suggest, at the heart of all these kinds of concerns lies a certain kind of assumption about the stability of our views of what is “normal” and, by extension, how much we should allow the world around us to challenge our established convictions. And it is also important to emphasize that I think concern is formulated in this way most often by those who are not on the margins—that is, chiefly by white, male, cis-gendered, Euro-American scholars like me.

What I’d like to explore in this essay, taking up Jonathan’s pattern of humility and holism, is the ways that we might think about what we find in the natural world—those things which God has made, which includes our human bodies. I only mean to offer a tentative proposal here, drawing on the work of some contemporary theologians I know both Jonathan and I have been reading and engaging with, towards what we might think of as a new natural theology. Not the sort, as Jonathan observed so many years ago in his *Primer*, which is set up as a polemic against biblical theology, but a different kind, which can help us to appreciate the ways that biblical theology is already doing this same sort of work, presenting us with a dialectic of the Kingdom. As Jonathan observes, “we do not have ‘an environment;’ we are a part of creation” and all of the authors of the Bible and the incarnate one are also part of creation in the same way.⁴

Having set some of the basic parameters of the discussion, I want to offer a brief survey of two recent attempts to find a “new” natural theology and natural law (neither of which are terribly new) and then finish with an equally brief commentary on where I think we might want to be eventually in terms of how we think about the world around us and its relation to thinking theologically.

The Protestant Revival of Natural Law

One of the most sustained and noteworthy efforts in natural theology has, somewhat unexpectedly, come from the Reformed theologian Alister McGrath. Starting at the turn of the millennium, McGrath undertook a substantial project in what he called “Scientific Theology.” The project produced a series of books, three academic volumes,⁵ a follow-up

4. Wilson, *God’s Good World*, 23–24.

5. Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Vol. 1, Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI:

collection of essays,⁶ and a shorter volume for lay readers.⁷ I remember discussing the series with Jonathan as we were setting up a workshop for scientists and theologians to have a roundtable discussion at UBC and Carey in 2008, as we both wondered what might come of the project, and Jonathan has published charitable but constructively critical reviews of each of McGrath's three volumes. There are many resonances between these two theologians. Both reject forms of naïve realism (the assumption that our personal knowledge is a straightforward representation of the world outside our minds) but are also cautious of the individualism inherent in wholesale rejections of realism, and both work in response to a kind of cautious appreciation of the legacy of Karl Barth, Charlotte von Kirschbaum, and by extension their student T. F. Torrance in reshaping the modern project of natural theology.

As a historical theologian McGrath offers several helpful correctives to the contemporary reception of natural theology. In contrast to some contemporary detractors, he is quick to point out that natural theology is a relatively mainstream part of Christian theology, arising frequently in the Bible (particularly in the Old Testament), and as part of reflection across the centuries of Christian tradition.⁸ In McGrath's view, more liberal pantheist approaches that sought to pursue natural theology as a substitute for the doctrine of God, or those which sought to displace Christian Scripture, represent a minority account.⁹ He ultimately situates natural theology as a kind of theology of the everyday: "the systematic exploration of a proposed link between the everyday world of our experience and another asserted transcendent reality."¹⁰

Building on this characterization, and drawing on Rom 12:2, McGrath suggests that *Christian* natural theology draws on Christian discernment, "seeing nature in a specific manner, which enables the truth,

Eerdmans, 2001); Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Vol. 2, Reality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Vol. 3, Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

6. Alister E. McGrath, *The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

7. Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

8. See Alister McGrath, *The Science of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 47.

9. McGrath, *Open Secret*, 2–3.

10. McGrath, *Open Secret*, 2.

beauty and goodness of God to be discerned, and which acknowledges nature as a legitimate, authorized, and limited pointer to the divine.”¹¹ The key takeaway here for my concern in this chapter is that McGrath poses natural theology as a relatively orthodox and uncontroversial way of giving (and trusting the results of) theological attention to the natural world.

I’d like to occupy this discerning space of theologically interested deference to the “everyday world of our experience” for the remainder of this essay and explore a bit further what it might mean for Christian ethics. There have been a number of attempts to advance an “everyday theology” in recent decades, so a reader might be justified in asking why we need to bother with natural theology to attempt this move. My answer here is to highlight the implicit holism that is represented in this account of natural theology. Here, natural theology includes the phenomena which might be called “nature” and those elements of everyday embodied human experience which might be ascribed to “culture.” At least in the way that I want to describe natural theology, we find ourselves attending, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to our perception, sensation, other beings, and so much more. And highlighted in this way, I wonder if the process of engaging in natural theology might do some of the work of repair that Jonathan calls for so urgently (and rightly) in *God’s Good World*.

However, it is also important to emphasize that this expansiveness can be deceptive. So much has turned on the way that “our” is defined in looking towards the everyday. In considering how observations of the tangible and sensible world around us can flow into a Christian ethic, we might be pressed to ask, how do we actually decide what things might be considered “natural” in natural theological reflection? And moreover, how or can we move from a sense of “normal” to generalizations about human nature and conduct?

In my view, there are two ways to go about doing this: one is the way of homogenization, and the other is the way of pluralism. In the former, we might strive to find a maximally universal account, and likely by extension a maximally generic account. There are traces of this kind of thinking in Utilitarianism and some forms of natural law reasoning (as I will note below). In the latter approach, the opposite is the case—as much as possible is drawn in and reckoned with and natural theological statements made in this mode may be as much about recognizing, preserving,

11. McGrath, *Open Secret*, 5.

and finding solidarity in difference as they are about finding continuities across our various experiences. Here we might locate some of the recent attempts to account for the agency and cognition of other-than-human-animals in Christian theology, or the even broader attempts in eco-theology to attend to the multiplicity of agencies swirling all around us.

From Natural Theology to Natural Law

In many ways, as I have already hinted above, natural *law* thinking represents the ethical side of a natural theology coin. Though in practice they can often be quite sharply contrasting, this is both ironic and strange. Just like natural theology, as McGrath describes it, modern natural law traditions are wide-ranging and diverse though theologians do not always appreciate this fact. Vincent Lloyd emphasizes this range of possible approaches in his recent book, *Black Natural Law*, drawing attention to the well-developed but often ignored tradition of Black natural law.¹² Like McGrath he also notes the plurality of modern approaches to natural law, but while McGrath works hard to demonstrate that natural theology can be *Christian* and straight-forwardly orthodox, Lloyd has different emphases. Part of the reason for this is because, in contrast to natural theology, natural law has often been used in the service of positivistic theological programs with quite narrow conceptions of “human nature.” Lloyd’s opening case study is the conservative US supreme court justice, Clarence Thomas, but other examples abound. As I have already hinted above, and as Lloyd argues, thinking around what is “natural,” outside a default white and privileged theological posture, tends to produce different kinds of methodological reflexes. Many of the same commitments remain—in particular, the notion that natural law opens up an epistemological space for considering the relation of everyday observation and embodied perception to a theological understanding of the world. However, Lloyd argues that, in some contrast to (default white) Euro-American natural law traditions, the black natural law tradition offers a more complex account of human nature: “it includes the capacity to reason, but also the capacities to feel and imagine.”¹³ Further, Lloyd argues that the overall approach in black natural law is more apophatic, “just as God exceeds all worldly descriptions, the image of God in humanity exceeds all worldly

12. Vincent Lloyd, *Black Natural Law* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

13. Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*, xi.

descriptions.”¹⁴ These two—the apophatic and embodied dimensions of black natural law—work together. In Lloyd’s description, “the black natural law tradition claims that reasoning, feeling, and imagining are characteristically human capacities, but these are descriptions that evoke rather than denote, human nature that is unrepresentable.”¹⁵ In Lloyd’s final point of contrast, black natural law is not primarily about providing support for ethical propositions, but can be seen as process-oriented. It is not about a kind of “do this, don’t do that” dynamic, but is much more complex and rich. And this process of considering human nature in a more complex, embodied, and apophatic way is itself generative: “this process when engaged in collectively, catalyses social movements and offers a critique of the wisdom of the world.”¹⁶

Can it be that the prevalence of broken relationships and families, sexual abuse, self-harm, and indifference to suffering that we find among Christians and Christian communities are somehow a consequence of a certain kind of theology? This is a diagnosis that Jonathan has laid down across a number of volumes, and one which I have also found hard to ignore. I find Lloyd’s analysis, and the case studies he provides drawing on the life and work of Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King Jr. to be compelling. If we are to pursue forms of theological thinking and Christian ethics which are both holistic—connecting up themes like ecclesiology and worship with bodies, meals, environments and art—and humble, there is something to be recaptured in the natural theology traditions, particularly the ways that Lloyd emphasizes apophaticism, shared action, and felt imagination.

As a Christian theologian whose own life includes a journey through anxiety and depression, I’ve spent quite a lot of time reflecting on this question of what it means to be human. So much of our collective thinking around mental health relies upon a pathologized notion of mental “ill health,” where to be anxious is to be broken and in need of fixing. In this way of thinking, an anxious person is taught to mistrust their body as it veers away from a “norm” and find ways to hide or medicate what could otherwise be characterized as a special sort of sensitivity. This posture can be found in relation to quite a wide range of what are sometimes called disabilities, and also to many other physical conditions. To have

14. Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*, xi.

15. Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*, xi.

16. Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*, viii.

a condition such as these is to dwell uneasily, in some cases more than others, outside the space of “normal.” This sense of pathology extends to the ways that we conceive of and provide treatment for much of what fits under the umbrella of neurodiversity, including ADHD and autism. As we learn more about how the human mind and brain are interwoven, and as we understand more about neurological and biochemical conditions which produce these conditions, it has become increasingly clear that these are not just problems that can or should be corrected but also bodies which are different in noteworthy ways. Thus neurodiversity might be seen as different from some other medical conditions which unambiguously lead one to seek some sort of correction.

I raise this because, depending on how a Christian chooses to deploy natural theology, we can end up with quite sharply different views on how we should be oriented towards our own bodies when they do not do what we expect or desire, or do not look like what is classified as “normal.” If one takes the kind of approach that I have tentatively offered here, I wonder whether we may end up being more charitable towards ourselves, and in that small minority of cases where someone finds themselves persistently in the “normal” category, I wonder whether there might be an opportunity to offer more grace—not just on an interpersonal level, but in the very mode of our theological reflection—to one’s fellow creatures.