

**Book launch, Neil Ormerod, *A Public God: Natural Theology Reconsidered***

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When you stop and think about it, I'm a strange choice to be speaking at the launch of a book on natural theology at a Catholic University. After all, I'm a Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, which means that I should prioritise spirit and faith over and against reason, and Revelation and the word of God over and against rational argument. Thus, when Neil says things like:

“the human good is what it is because of the type of beings we are. It is something we can come to appreciate through reflecting intelligently on our experience, without necessarily requiring a revelation from God.”

I should vigorously disagree. Except, that I don't. In fact, it's precisely because I'm a Protestant, evangelical, Pentecostal that I value Neil's work as much as I do. This is because I know what Neil is talking about when he notes that:

fundamentalist and literalist readings of religious tradition based on particular claims to divine Revelation often stand in contradiction to the outcomes of reason, be it scientific moral or metaphysical. Worse still, these claims take on a tribal dimension of “our God against your God”. Natural theology resists all such claims because it understands God as the source of all meaning, all truth, and all goodness, wherever it is found. For religion to contradict reason would then be for God to contradict Godself. That way lies madness.

(As an aside, I just love the way Neil writes. His work is grounded in Lonergan, but he writes with a passion and clarity that transcends the master. Neil is just as comfortable writing for the Sydney morning Herald as he is for the *Theological Studies*. But as I was saying...)

“That way lies madness,” Neil says, and indeed we live in crazy days, and his work stands as a prophetic call to sanity.

There is, firstly, the irrationality of religious fundamentalism, which is supposedly concerned with dogmatic truth, but because it resists reason, has no way of dealing with competing claims. In this context, Neil argues for intellectual conversion, which involves committing oneself to a fully human knowing based on reasoning. The language of conversion should

resonate with evangelicals, mainline Protestants and Catholics alike; but perhaps we're not used to hearing the conjunction of "intellectual" and "conversion." We tend to identify conversion with spirituality, and divorce it from faith, but the consequence of this approach is a stupid Christianity.

This stupidity has been bought close to home to me this week in discussions with my son. Jeremy was educated in a Christian school, one with a good reputation that generally espoused the healthy values of Christian faith. But it was also thoroughly opposed to the theory of evolution - and time and again students were taught that you can't believe in the Bible *and* evolutionary science. Notwithstanding the fact that I always rejected the school's position on this topic, my son has come to the view that Christianity tends to be anti-science, anti-reason. He is now in his third year of psychology, and seems to understand his own discipline as being inherently anti-religious - that science is evidenced based, but faith has no foundation at all. Sadly, it's the lack of intellectual conversion within the church that has set up this science / faith divide.

As the title of his book makes clear, Neil's understanding of natural theology is that it is public. That is to say, natural theology isn't just concerned with proofs for the existence of God, but it addresses the cultural context in which we live. That context now incorporates the so called new atheists, Dawkins, Hitchens, Krauss, and the like. The problem we face is that their version of fundamentalist atheism - intolerant, evangelistic, and aggressive as it is - seems to be doing a good job of convincing people that Christian faith is irrational; the equivalent of believing in Santa Claus and fairies. And this has consequences, not only for church attendance, but for society as a whole. Faith is not just about belief, but it's also about morality and justice, and when society comes to the view that the church is stupid, it stops listening to what the church has to say. In so doing, it dismisses the good news of the gospel, and the related social justice teaching of the church. And if the public voice of the church on behalf of the poor, and the outcast, and the imprisoned is silenced, it's not clear that Dawkins and his ilk will be able to provide an adequate alternative.

One of Neil's key arguments, then, is that natural theology is central to the social, cultural, and political mission of the church, since it teaches the church how to engage in public conversation. Indeed, if the church forgets the language of reason - if it can't explain its identity and values using publicly available language and logic, then it might as well be

speaking gobbledygook. Worse, its public engagement is reduced to power politics – to an us versus them mentality – to sectarianism and division.

I had this wonderful insight when I was reading *A Public God* (for the second or third time preparing for this presentation), and it's that natural theology could be an agent of ecumenical and interreligious healing - and more broadly, a source of global peace. I can't say it is well as Neil does, so let me quote him:

One of the advantages of building the case for God on the basis of a natural theology is that it makes it very clear that God is not a tribal God belonging to one people, one race, one nation. This is a God who creates the entire universe, who is the source of all being on all goodness; we cannot evoke God against the other as if they are excluded from God's care, because they, too, are known and loved into existence by this one true God.

Again, for this healing to be possible, the church is challenged to convert. And intellectual conversion is no easy task, largely because it requires that we examine ourselves; that we think about our thinking and the assumptions that inform our judgements. For evangelicals, for example, it demands serious reflection on the way that we read the Bible. I'm used to the argument that we should subject our "reason" to the truth of Scripture, but Neil argues that the challenge also goes the other direction:

Where we draw conclusions from such acts of divine election that contradict the outcomes of sound natural theology, then we must look again at those conclusions and question their validity. For example, the Bible portrays God as changing the divine mind, but the present natural theology argues that God is unchanging. Which way should we go? The Bible may portray God sanctioning violent immoral acts. Should we take this at face value? And so, from the churches earlier centuries, Christian thinkers recognised the need to purify their faith in the light of good philosophy, to eliminate anthropomorphic understandings of God, and reinterpret such passages in ways congruent with what reason required.

So natural theology is a challenge for the church, but Neil takes the argument further, stating that scientists (along with politicians) need intellectual conversion. This will require them to look beyond the reductionism of their disciplines, to appreciate that "reality"

cannot be reduced to what we can see, and neither can it be reduced to a formula. Even if Stephen Hawking or one of his successor is able to provide us with a theory of everything – a unification of theories of general relativity and quantum physics - even so, reality will transcend that theory and its formulae. Science may capture something of the rationality of the universe, but it doesn't begin to exhaust that rationality, or explain it.

Given that natural theology is meant to be healing, I probably shouldn't admit that one of the joys of reading Neil's work is watching him eviscerate the arguments of the new atheists, making it clear that their reasoning is unreasonable. But Neil is a gentler person than me, and he's also an optimist, envisaging a future in which natural theology has facilitated intellectual conversion in the broader society. I have to admit that I'm not convinced that a widespread "intellectual conversion" is likely among the academy or our politicians. But maybe I'm wrong. Perhaps belief in the existence of God is enough to ground this optimism – in which case natural theology itself is a reason for hope.

I'm going to finish by recounting two personal stories that relate to the content of *A Public God*. The first is from a testimony of friend of mine, who was completing a PhD and struggling with his faith (theses have a tendency to do that). My friend's question was, do I really have reason enough to believe in God? It was a reading of Neil's book that enabled him to conclude with an emphatic, yes. And this is surely compelling evidence that *A Public God* achieves its purpose.

The second personal story is my own. The final chapter of *A Public God* takes on the problem of pain, suffering, and evil. I was privileged to work through the content of this chapter in one-on-one conversation with Neil. In 2010, I had the accident that left me in this chair. I spent seven months at Prince of Wales Hospital, and Neil visited almost every week. Of course, we discussed any number of topics, but high on the agenda was the problem of pain. The issue of suffering isn't merely an academic or abstract topic, but it gets to the heart of the human experience; where is God when we suffer? If it wasn't for Neil's conversations, I wonder whether I might have given up on God. And the good news for you is that what we wrestled with for seven months, you can access a single chapter. And take it from me – it's worth the read.