

Preface

The purpose of this book is to act as a companion piece for the work I wrote with my friend and colleague Cynthia Crysdale, *Creator God, Evolving World*.¹ That book operated largely with a framework of a natural theology to argue that the classical conception of God—as all knowing, all powerful, and unchanging—is perfectly adequate to deal with the new world of scientific discoveries, such as evolution and quantum mechanics, that are often seen as either rendering God irrelevant or as requiring some fundamental rethinking of the divine nature. In that sense, it was a defense of classical theism. However, in that work we did not address directly the question of God’s existence. That God exists was more or less presupposed, though we noted some directions that give an indication as to why one might want to affirm God’s existence.

This book, by contrast, is a work in natural theology that seeks to address the question of God’s existence. Nonetheless, it does not simply seek to spell out various proofs for God’s existence and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. It attempts to go a bit deeper, to ask about what sorts of cultural shifts we currently face that render arguments for God’s existence so problematic, and how these shifts

1. Neil Ormerod and Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Creator God, Evolving World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

might be addressed. In that sense, it seeks to reformulate natural theology as a culturally *contextual theology* rather than some philosophical decontextualized argument. At present, that context is dominated by the writings of the so-called new atheists—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and others—who draw on sciences, politics and “reason” to dismiss belief in God and religions that support this belief.

This work also aims to see natural theology as a form of *public theology*. Much is written today about the need to bring theological resources to bear in discussing matters of public interest and concern, such as the impact of globalization, secularization in the West, or the debates surrounding religion and science. Many of these attempts, fine works in themselves, still draw on explicit elements of a particular religious tradition, rendering them less accessible to those outside that tradition. While this present work sits firmly within the Christian tradition in that it draws on well-worn paths present in the history of Christian thought on natural theology, nonetheless it prescind from explicitly Christian beliefs or the use of Christian authors as “authorities” to settle arguments. The arguments need to stand or fall in their own right. However, to do so it must examine and challenge the notions of public reason that operate in our context, seeking alternatives that are more conducive to religious belief (see chapter 2).

Finally, natural theology is not just contextual and public, but also a form of *political theology*. Political theology is concerned with the political consequences of religious belief in terms of policies on matters such as economics, migration, gender issues, and bioethics. Often, such theologies will seek to draw direct political consequences from specific religious commitments, an approach that raises questions about the interrelationship of faith and politics, church and state. Such incursions into politics often run counter to the ethos of separation of church and state and the aggressive secularism present

in the West. In dealing with these matters, we often seem to find ourselves caught between either the complete elimination of religion from political debates or a return to a theocratic Christendom (or its Islamic equivalent).

However, a successful natural theology presents a God who is known through a form of publicly accessible reason. Such a stance calls into question the process of radical secularization that effectively marginalizes religions and rules out political appeals to God. As a form of political theology, natural theology must consider the political consequences of the public acknowledgment of God's existence. It must face the false dichotomy of either secularization or theocracy head-on, to suggest ways in which there can be public acknowledgment of God's existence without the consequence of theocracy or a return to Christendom. The proposal developed in chapter 6 is tentative, but it does suggest that the current dichotomy does not exhaust all possible alternatives.

The key issue that emerges in the book is what Bernard Lonergan calls "intellectual conversion" (and, to a lesser extent, "moral conversion"). Such a conversion requires a shift in our unreflective stances on the meaning of terms like "reality" and "existence." In his major work, *Insight*, Lonergan speaks of two forms of knowing: one based on human reasoning, the other on animal extroversion.² What he means by "intellectual conversion" is learning to distinguish these two forms of knowing and committing oneself to a fully human knowing based on reasoning, including the metaphysical implications this has for our notion of reality.³ It has become

2. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, vol. 3, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 11–12.

3. While Lonergan does not use the term "intellectual conversion" in *Insight*, it is basic to the program of self-appropriation present in the book. The terminology derives from his later writings.

increasingly clear to me that without something like intellectual conversion, any argument for the existence of God will remain “unreal.” As will be shown in the current work, the general lack of such conversion, evident across the board among scientists and many philosophers, gives some idea of the cultural difficulty to be faced. Such a process of conversion is not alien to the scientific method. Nonetheless, it runs against the grain of the implicit philosophical stance of many of the new atheists, with their appeals to the findings of science (chapter 3). Nonetheless, such a conversion is startlingly strange when first encountered, and must overcome the persistent myth that somehow reality is limited to what we see!

While the work with Cynthia provided the motivation for the present work, it did not emerge without other precursors. I have written a number of research papers that address the question of natural theology in various ways, as well as some more popular pieces that have appeared on the Australian Broadcasting Commission Religion and Ethics website.⁴ The present work is not simply a repeat of these, but a major reordering of the material with substantial new material as well. I hope it offers a more coherent account than the more occasional pieces have allowed. I should also note that I have not repeated material found in my book with Cynthia. That book more than adequately deals with a number of objections raised by atheists, particularly the objection that evolution and other chance processes rule out the possibility of divine design. Interested readers should refer to that work if this is the question they are seeking to address.

4. The academic pieces include Neil Ormerod, “God and Politics,” *Australasian Catholic Record* 84 (2007); Ormerod, “In Defence of Natural Theology: Bringing God into the Public Realm,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 71 (2007); Ormerod, “Charles Taylor and Bernard Lonergan on Natural Theology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74 (2009); Ormerod, “Preliminary Steps Towards a Natural Theology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 76 (2011); Ormerod, “Secularisation and the ‘Rise’ of Atheism,” *Australian EJournal of Theology* 17 (2010). The ABC website for Religion and Ethics is <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/>.

In bringing this work to completion, I would like to thank various people for their assistance and encouragement, particularly my friends and colleagues Cynthia Crysdale and Shane Clifton, with whom I had many fruitful conversations, and from whom I received helpful feedback on the text. I would also like to thank my graduate students John Collins, Dominic Arcamone, and David Perry for their feedback on the text. Much of this work was completed while I enjoyed hospitality at three institutions, the University of San Diego with Professor Gerard Mannion, Sewanee University of the South with Professor Cynthia Crysdale, and Marquette University with Professor Robert Doran, SJ, during my sabbatical leave in 2012. I am very grateful to each for the overwhelming generosity they showed me. Finally I would like to thank the staff at Fortress Press, particularly Michael Gibson, for their commitment to theological publishing and their willingness to take up this particular project.