

The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology, Alister McGrath, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2008 (ISBN: 978-1-4051-2691-5), x + 372 pp., Pb \$45.00

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If you are puzzling whether to read this book, the main claim is right there in the clever title: *The Open Secret*. The tensions – the contradictions, some will say – are built into the governing metaphor. An open secret is an oxymoron; nothing can be at once hidden and public. What we typically mean is that the once secret is now out. But McGrath pushes both sides simultaneously. ‘Nature is here interpreted as an “open secret” – a publicly accessible entity, whose true meaning is known only from the standpoint of the Christian faith’ (p. 16). Christians know the secret of the universe, which, though this nature is plainly evident, open to all, nobody else can see. Everybody is looking at nature. Everybody is seeing. But everybody else sees confusedly. Only Christians have ‘the right way of “seeing nature”’ (p. 116).

Nature is there for all to see, and the main contemporary human enterprise that studies nature is natural science. McGrath assumes ‘a realist worldview’ (p. 2). But what natural science discovers is fact of the matter; when it comes to meanings, to the metaphysics of the matter, natural science is stymied. Natural science is stuck with the phenomena, and has no access to the transcendent. Science is blind to dimensions of depth. As open as nature is, its significance remains secret. ‘Christian theology provides an interpretative framework by which nature may be “seen” in a way that connects with the transcendent. The enterprise of natural theology is thus one of discernment, of seeing nature in a certain way, of viewing it through a particular and specific set of spectacles’ (p. 3). Christians put a transcendent spin on what the scientists see and that spin gets it right.

Philosophers, humanists, poets, novelists, or whoever else looks at nature, have the same problem as the scientists. They have ‘a flawed capacity to discern’ (p. 196). Even the natural theologians (prior to McGrath) got it wrong. ‘“Natural theology” designates the enterprise of arguing directly from the observation of nature to demonstrate the existence of God’ (p. 4). Such arguments over the centuries have failed, and continue to fail. Rather, with Christian insight, ‘our eyes are opened, and a veil is removed’ (p. 5, following Acts 9). Only Christians see, to put it provocatively, the *nature of nature*. ‘The natural order, when viewed through the prism of the Christian tradition, ceases to be a noise and becomes a tune’ (p. 184, following Michael Polanyi).

There is a perennial human interest in the transcendent, and this has continued, even when sub-surface, in contemporary secular thought 'A concern for the "transcendent" often nestles deep within philosophies that are, at least on the face of it, thoroughly secular in their outlook' (p. 59). Such search is inconclusive; the result is 'the fundamental ambiguity of nature'. 'It is widely agreed that nature can be "read" in theist, atheist, or agnostic ways.' 'Nature itself cannot be said to mandate or authorize any specific reading' (p. 116, cf. pp. 300–306). Nature does not give us any deeper answers as to its significance. That is why scientists, humanists, poets, novelists, philosophers, even the would-be natural theologians, always come up wanting.

Nevertheless, there is widespread longing for and suspicion that in, with, and under nature there is 'the numinous' (Rudolf Otto) or 'the ineffable' (William James). More recently, McGrath considers Iris Murdoch ('the sublime'), Roy Bhaskar ('meta-reality'), and John Dewey (emergent potentialities in self-affirmation) (Chapter 3). 'A Christian natural theology is the theological counterpart to the general cultural quest for the transcendent... As we shall argue, such a natural theology resonates with this widespread perception that there is "something there", offering an explanation of both its origins and its transcendent significance' (p. 28). McGrath surveys various attempts at 'discerning the transcendent in nature' (p. 73) sometimes finding this 'resonance' (pp. 233–238). Returning to the book's title, is this widespread perception 'open' or 'secret'? Both and neither. Non-Christians often seem to have hints of the transcendent. Transcendent presence is semi-secret, so to speak, until fully revealed in Christ.

McGrath enjoys the social construction of nature, or, as he puts it of 'natures'. Despite the enormous successes of the natural sciences, 'nature' remains today, as it has always been, a fluid term into which different persons pack different meanings (p. 9). Nature is different spokes for different folks. This is the tale of the blind men and the elephant all over again. 'Any notion of the "objectivity" of human interpretations of nature is undermined by the very nature of the psychological processes by which observation takes place' (p. 11). 'An aspect of nature is thus "seen" and interpreted through a lens which is a cultural or social artifact – but must still be regarded as "natural", despite having been constructed' (p. 128). McGrath has claimed in his earlier systematic theology: 'The concept of "nature" is a serious candidate for the most socially conditioned of all human concepts.' 'One does not "observe" nature; one constructs it.'¹

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Volume 1. Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), p. 88, p. 113.

That conviction continues here. McGrath features a chapter written by Joanna Collicutt on 'Discernment and the Psychology of Perception', elaborating the claims that 'Human beings are embodied, and human minds are embrained' (p. 81), adding psychological and physiological processes to the sociological ones in human knowing. This chapter, closing his introductory analysis of previous efforts, has a driving theme: 'The process of developing perceptual schemas seems to be one of active construction of representations of the physical world, but many of the constructions arrived at themselves seem to be invariant' (pp. 89–90). Humans, from childhood onward, see colors alike and reach common convictions about dealing with ordinary objects, such as trees and rocks. But they construct their frameworks for seeing the nature of nature.

'Perception is egocentric and enactive. It is essential to appreciate that there is no such thing as objective human perception' (p. 92). 'The environment is viewed *from the beginning* through "significance spectacles"' (p. 102, his emphasis). 'Definitions of nature may well tell us more about those who define it than what it is in itself' (p. 10). That is, until we get to Christians, who, more fortunately, with their Christian spectacles have a ' "critical realist" epistemology' (p. 11). 'Our approach insists that the human attempt to make sense of things is shaped by the way things actually are' (p. 12). Critics will here instantly retort, of course, that this social-psychological construction is as true of McGrath as it is of everybody else. *Tu quoque*. McGrath thinks he can concede this, and still be a critical realist, still get the truth (Chapter 10).

Despite the promise of Christian 'resonance' with this longing for the transcendent, when McGrath starts to set the foundations for his rediscovery, he is more inclined to sweep the previous quest away, wondering whether it has all been nothing but 'a dead end' (Chapter 7), undermined by its ambiguity and inconclusiveness. The central part of the book is: 'The Foundations of Natural Theology: Ground-Clearing and Rediscovery.' The place to get your natural theology is at the feet of Jesus. 'Jesus may rightly be regarded as making use of a developed "natural theology", understood as an interpretative framework by which nature may be "seen" in a way that connects with the transcendent' (p. 119). Jesus did it, but nobody else can do it unless and until Jesus acts as a catalyst.

Jesus' parables are earthy; he sees the power of God at work on the landscape and in the coming kingdom. But McGrath also emphasizes how Jesus' parables invite 'seeing as', getting let in on a secret. The teaching is 'invitational': 'Consider seeing it this way' (p. 120, following Marcus Borg). 'It is not so much that these parables are intrinsically "dark sayings" . . . The problem is determining their meaning. The imagery of the parables may be accessible; their significance remains a mystery, save for those "in the know"' (p. 121). Natural theology is like

that; most puzzle around in the dark, remaining in mystery. Christians, considering Jesus' invitation, are 'in the know' (p. 124). There is a 'hidden meaning', a 'covert interpretation' (p. 125). The reason for the ground-clearing is that everybody else is in the dark until enlightened by the gospel.

Another approach might have asked: Why sweep it all away? Why not sweep it up, selectively perhaps, as fractured omnipresence? 'One may see such things without perceiving their full significance, or discerning the "big picture" to which they point' (p. 172). None of these naturalists detecting transcendence in nature were prompted by that to recite the *Apostles' Creed*, but many of them did suspect 'something there'. McGrath seems both to want to 'resonate' with this and to sweep it away – more ambivalence. 'The approach advocated in this book affirms that the empirical is a legitimate means of discovering and encountering the divine' (p. 20). Examples are the anthropic principle and mathematics in nature (pp. 240–248).

McGrath will insist, of course, that this empirical must be filtered and constructed through Christian spectacles. But then do we want to say that empirical scientists are blind to the deeper secrets? Why not speak of Christians as 'seeing better' or 'seeing deeper'. 'We would argue that Christian theology provides an ontological foundation which confirms and consolidates otherwise fleeting, fragmentary glimpses of a greater reality, gained from the exploration of nature without an attending theoretical framework. . . . What is transitory and qualified is clarified and consolidated from within the standpoint of the Christian tradition' (p. 248). In an artist's metaphor, 'nature turns out to be "the first sketch", "only the image, the symbol", of that greater reality to which it points' (p. 288, following C.S. Lewis). If so there were already first sketches of, glimpses into the secret.

This tension returns with caution about the social construction of nature. Now we get twists and turns to reconcile McGrath's social construction with his critical realism as he sweeps away other constructions and then builds his Christian natural theology. ' "Nature" needs to be defined and translated, recognizing that it is a constructed notion. Both the subject matter and the phenomenon of nature are determined by individual and group agendas and culture' (p. 167). 'Attempts to construct a "natural theology" must therefore be recognized to be just as culturally bound as the "revealed" or "dogmatic" theology that they attempt to evade or displace' (p. 168).

Yet: 'The proper response to the Enlightenment's unrealistic aspirations to objectivity is not to abandon any attempt at critical evaluation of interpretative possibilities, but to encourage a realistic and cautious attempt to determine which of the various interpretations of nature may be regarded as the "best explanation", as judged by criteria such as parsimony, elegance, or explanatory power' (p. 155). We do need to

evaluate and consolidate those non-gospel glimpses. Here Barth went wrong, ignoring science and Brunner was psychologically naive (pp. 158–164). McGrath hopes for discovery of something better: Barth with science, Brunner more psychologically sophisticated. In this rediscovery of natural theology we seek 'dialogue, cross-fertilization, and enrichment' between science and religion (as promised on the back cover).

Maybe Jesus saw nature clearly, but any natural theology does need to figure in Darwinian nature (appropriately, in this year commemorating Darwin's discoveries). Darwinian nature continues the ambivalence, a 'grandeur in this view of life', despite the struggle and 'survival of the fittest'. Darwin saw things that Jesus did not see, and some of his insights are more than a glimpse or first sketch; they run deep into the nature of the creative process. The natural sciences reveal deep space and deep time, life persisting in the midst of its perpetual perishing over billions of years, of which Jesus knew nothing. By these standards, his eschatology was myopic. True, these sciences, descriptive of the phenomena, do not of themselves supply consensus accounts of the significance of nature. But they do provide insights into dimensions of creation that transform theology.

Nature is of course quite ambiguous to Christians too. By the Christian account this is because nature is fallen after sin, also because the human seeing of nature is blinded in this sin. 'The whole creation', asserts Paul, 'has been groaning in travail until now'. 'The creation was subjected to futility' (Romans 8.19–20). Even Jesus seems to recognize that nature can be ambiguous, until he unveils what is hidden (p. 116). Certainly the classical theologians found a nature that was imperfect, cursed, on account of human sin.

But this account sits ill with Darwinian biology. There the struggle in nature is what it is, and ever has been so, independently of human sin. 'Groaning in travail' is in the nature of things from time immemorial. The way of natural history too is a *via dolorosa*, which Darwin saw better than Jesus. The element of struggle is essential to evolutionary genesis. The evolutionary wave is propagated onward, using and sacrificing particular individuals, who are employed in, but readily abandoned to, the larger currents of life. The nature of nature on Earth is a millennium-long struggle for life, perpetually perishing, perpetually regenerated. Can Christians still connect this more harsh, naturalistic account of creation with the transcendent? Does nature need to be redeemed? Possibly, McGrath thinks, this will involve 'a doctrine of salvation in restoring – or at least beginning the process of restoration – of a disordered creation' (p. 205). Maybe Darwinian nature needs Christian repair?

An important theme in this Christian discernment is the capacity to see beauty in nature. 'The recognition of the beauty in nature is

significant in itself; yet it also has importance in terms of what it intimates and suggests. From a Christian perspective, an appreciation of the beauty of nature can be interpreted as a transitory intuition of what is eternal, the experience signifying yet not delivering something of immense and transformative importance' (p. 282). 'The creation was brought into being as beautiful; it will be restored to that beauty; and traces of that beauty can still be discerned within its present state' (p. 207).

Christians can filter out the weeds in the fallen garden. 'The theological framework set out in this book allows the good to be identified with the wheat, and evil with the weeds, thus offering an interpretative apparatus for the "seeing" of nature.' 'Nature, as presently observed, cannot be assumed to be nature, as originally created' (pp. 207–208). But Darwinian biology asserts exactly that; and, further, it is unable to find any weeds in wild nature – only more or less well adapted fits. There is some attention to Darwin here (e.g. pp. 300–306), but probing these questions is not one of the strengths of the book. (McGrath has addressed Richard Dawkins' anti-theology in another work.) McGrath is Gifford lecturer at the University of Aberdeen in 2009. Perhaps we will hear more.

McGrath is at his best in historical theology; his analyses there are keen and revealing. But he follows a course that is somewhat isolated from the contemporary debate. Looking at the index, Ian Barbour is not here, nor John Cobb, nor George Ellis, nor Simon Conway Morris (mentioned in acknowledgments), nor Christian de Duve, nor Philip Hefner, nor Nancey Murphy, nor Arthur Peacocke, nor Robert Russell, nor Ernan McMullin. Nor, to turn to the European continent, is Niels Henrik Gregersen, Willem Drees, Mikael Stenmark, John Haught, John Polkinghorne, and Wentzel van Huyssteen get mention only.

The promise of the book runs high: 'Alister McGrath sets out a new vision for natural theology, re-establishing its legitimacy and utility' (back cover). He says he is 'beginning all over again, in effect setting aside past definitions, preconceptions, judgments, and prejudices, in order to allow a fresh examination of this fascinating and significant notion' (p. 3). The performance, however commendable, hardly meets the promised expectation. Natural theology is here perhaps re-vitalized ('re-established'), but the position set forth is hardly 'new vision'. This is really the Karl Barth/Emil Brunner debate of the 1930's *redivivus*. Karl Barth is the most frequently cited theologian in the index, although McGrath (or Collicutt) really thinks Brunner (with more psychology) might be a better guide (p. 109, pp. 158–164). In the standard vocabulary, this is 'theology of nature', not 'natural theology', though McGrath does not cast his argument using that vocabulary.

Speaking of aesthetics, the book has a basically ugly cover: a somewhat disheveled and grossly obese Jesus hunkered down and looking

at daisies – not lilies. (The cover image is Stanley Spencer, *Christ in the Wilderness: Consider the Lilies*.) Meanwhile, the ungainly cover, along with the clever title, does force us to face McGrath's central argument: We ordinary humans should follow Jesus, do what he did, and consider how he considered the lilies. Despite what Jesus says, we ought not ourselves to consider the lilies in themselves. We cannot do that because we do not have his considerable powers (p. 210). What Christians must do is consider how Jesus considered the lilies. Consider how Jesus constructed the lilies, as evidence of the glory and goodness of God. Consider whether you want to construct them that way too. That constructs them in the Christian 'grand narrative' (p. 250). Otherwise, on your own, you will come to ('construct') a dead end.

I myself do construct the lilies among the glories of creation. If I am to follow Jesus, I must not only consider him, but do for myself what he says: Consider the lilies, in themselves. I reach the conviction that these flowers of the field just might have been constructed, through an evolutionary genesis (a grand narrative if ever there was one), in such way that their intrinsic value might be recognized by insightful naturalists independently of Jesus own consideration. In *Genesis* (by a non-Christian author), God bade the earth to bring forth and when God considered the results, God found it all very good. The Psalmists and Job, also pre-Christian authors, considered nature positively. Considering these grand lilies can and often does invite the question whether there is 'somebody there'. That question still runs sub-surface in contemporary biology. 'Nature makes us wonder' (p. 255). Christians do detect transcendence in this wonderland Earth, and we need that witness of 'baptized imagination' (p. 221, p. 256). Amen.

One thing is guaranteed to the reader who picks up the book with the puzzling title. Read it through and you be challenged to wonder. That happened to me. Open it up. The book itself may catalyze discovering some secrets.