

THE GIFFORD LECTURES

by Michael Giffin

The Measure of God,
by Larry Witham;
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SINCE *QUADRANT* prides itself on respecting differences of opinion, without prejudices for or against religion, “judging material by the importance of ideas rather than requiring any agreement”, *The Measure of God* is an important book for its readers. The sub-title is *History’s Greatest Minds Wrestle with Reconciling Science and Religion*. It provides an overview of the influential Gifford Lectures since they began in the late nineteenth century. We need to be familiar with this territory if we aren’t to appear limited by the simplistic schoolboy-schoolgirl assumptions that science disproves religion or religion is an affront to reason.

The purpose of Lord Gifford’s bequest—given to the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, St Andrews and Aberdeen—is to sponsor lectures that promote the study of “natural theology”, which is knowledge of the divine order acquired through reason without the aid of revelation. One of the most prestigious honours in academia, a Gifford appointment normally presents a series of lectures over an academic year, given with the intent that an edited version is published in book form. A number of these books have become classics in the fields of theology or philosophy and their relationship to science. To review the list is a salutary experience. Few *Quadrant* readers will not have cited one or several of them, perhaps without realising they are Gifford Lectures. The author of *The Measure of God*, Larry Witham, a multi-award-winning journalist, describes a selection of the lectures that fall into distinctive groupings: the rise and fall of idealism, anthropology, psychology, physics, sociology, the science of history, the revolt against reason, and the new sciences.

The rise and fall of idealism includes James Stirling. Stirling argued that Kant was the logical precursor of Hegel, who made explicit the concrete universal that was implicit in Kant, thus providing an idealism that was a formidable, and perhaps the only, philosophical system around to defend theism against the rising tide of materialist philosophy. Stirling didn’t doubt evolution, but after restating the natural theology of the Greeks he went on to attack Darwin’s argument against design on two of its well-known vulnerabilities: natural selection needed immense time to produce so many creatures and a source of variation to work on.

According to a formula that had stood for forty years,

Lord Kelvin dated the earth’s age at 100 to 500 million years, using the cooling rate of a molten solar system, suggesting the earth was too young for evolution by accumulation. Even Darwin admitted Kelvin’s theory was one of his “sorest troubles”, but Stirling and Kelvin both lived to see the facts of science change when Pierre Curie used radioactive decay to find the earth much more ancient, today put at 4.5 billion years old. Although ignorant of future science, Stirling raised questions that still haunt biology. Also, he didn’t address the debate among the idealists themselves.

In the words of Mary Douglas, a later Gifford Lecturer, “How to explain the cruelties and irrationalities enshrined in mythology was one of the great puzzles of scholarship in the 1870–1910 period.” Four pioneers of anthropology as a scientific discipline gave Gifford Lectures: Max Müller, Edward Tylor, Andrew Lang and James Frazer. Müller, from the school of nature mythology, held that the earliest religious belief arose from human awe at natural phenomena—sky and stars, sun and moon, day and night, storms and seasons—and he believed the sun was the most important object in primitive religion, fuelling the idea of a single all-powerful being in charge of the universe.

Tylor argued that the earliest mind developed by gradual stages of rational interpretation of the world, and these stages were built into the physical laws of learning. For Tylor, every culture, no matter how separated, had gone through the same stages. Lang argued in favour of a primitive theism, with savage high-god ethics, before an ancient descent from monotheism to animism, or from religion to mythology. In his magisterial *The Golden Bough* Frazer transformed Tylor’s theory of rational evolution into a sweeping overview of the human story: the rise of man from magic to religion and finally to science.

Josiah Royce and William James both introduced psychology to the Giffords, with two series of lectures eventually published as *The World and the Individual* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Royce was a Hegelian idealist, James was anti-Hegelian, but their rivalry was friendly and they taught each other’s views. James wanted psychology to be a true science and felt that, as long as the Hegelian dialectic influenced psychology departments, scientific research—the psychology we now call rats, stats and brats—wouldn’t advance.

Under the Giffords, though, psychology was becoming a kind of natural theology. James Ward and Conway Lloyd Morgan grappled with questions of immortality, mortality, and why human beings are different from animals despite similar brains, sense organs and nervous systems. Ward defended the spiritual, criticising the agnosticism of Herbert Spencer and the naturalism of Thomas Huxley, both of whom explained the mind as

having purely material causes. Morgan's lectures formalised and popularised the idea of emergent evolution. His study of animals convinced him that the human mind emerged almost abruptly, suggesting the direct presence of God. Henri Bergson, Samuel Alexander and Alfred North Whitehead each gave subsequent Gifford Lectures that sought to link psychology, biological evolution and the new physics.

When the Gifford Lectures began, Victorian ether physics still reigned. In 1927, Arthur Stanley Eddington used the Giffords to bring his audience up to date with the discoveries of Einstein and Rutherford, hinting that changing concepts about matter and atomic theory may support a God hypothesis that had been losing ground in physics for over a century. The world, he said, might be seeing the final overthrow of strict causality, where religion would be possible for a rational scientific person.

Niels Bohr, awarded the Nobel Prize in physics for investigating the structure of atoms and the radiation emanating from them, conceived the principle of complementarity: that is, items could be separately analysed as having several contradictory properties. Bohr's most famous student was Werner Heisenberg, a fellow Nobel laureate, one of the founders of quantum mechanics, best known for discovering the uncertainty principle, a central principle of modern physics. Although he was a physicist, Bohr's Giffords, given in 1949, were epistemological and more about communication problems than existence or reality or the structure and limitations of reason. Heisenberg's Giffords, given in 1955, revised the Aristotelian concept of *potentia*, which Aquinas placed in God himself, saying that quantum reality had substituted possibility for necessity at the foundation of matter.

Sociology, a new area of social study, saw itself as the highest science, flowering atop a historical progression that allowed physics to explain matter and biology to explain organisms. John Dewey, William Temple and Reinhold Niebuhr brought sociological insights to their Giffords. Dewey, a liberal, believed in a brave new world where scientific optimism replaced outworn traditions. His lectures, given in 1928-29, promoted a future of educational advancement where the application of intelligence would eradicate the dualism that separated essence and existence.

William Temple, an Anglican bishop, disagreed with Dewey's naturalism and technocracy but shared his vision of social promise. Temple's Giffords, given in 1932-34, opposed the continental neo-orthodoxy that saw God only in Scripture and Christ. He looked for revelation everywhere through what he called a "dialectical realism" that consciously competed with Marx's "dialectical materialism".

Niebuhr had grown up in the Social Gospel Movement, but his thinking had matured by the time he

gave his Giffords in 1939. He concentrated on what he called "Christian realism", a belief in the flaws of human nature, where social and political power can't be trusted and need to be held in check by other powers in order to curtail the sinful propensity of humankind.

IT WAS INEVITABLE that history, once a poetical or liberal art, would become a science, with radical implications for canonical texts. But it was also inevitable that a historian's attitudes would be framed by his or her secular or religious prejudices. Several leading historians gave Gifford Lectures, and none better represented how the new science of history met religious belief than Albert Schweitzer, Arnold Toynbee and Herbert Butterfield. "Religion," Schweitzer said, "has nothing to fear from confrontation with historical truth." Schweitzer espoused a universal ethic, comparing Eastern and Western religious beliefs; the East suggested a mystical ethic that denied the world; the West suggested a rational ethic that affirmed earthly enjoyment while simultaneously separating science and morality.

Toynbee defended the search for historical patterns, an idea scoffed at by "scientific" historians, as he felt the renunciation of all patterns was impossible for a historian, and even chaos could be a scheme for interpreting human events. Butterfield belonged to the objectivist school, but believed the historian must exercise humility when approaching historical facts, for the historian could rarely explain exact causes the way a chemist could write out a chemical reaction. The great events of history, he observed, often turned on arbitrary occurrences: Cleopatra's nose, or a cornice falling on a prime minister's head.

The Gifford Lectures participated strongly in the post-Enlightenment interrogation of reason as a verifying calculus. In 1931-32 Etienne Gilson defended medieval philosophers—and both natural theology and natural law—by describing what their systematic use of evidence and reason added to Western philosophy, and by pointing out that they provided the methodological apparatus used by later rationalists and empiricists. In 1937-38 Karl Barth argued that natural theology, in its teleological quest to know God, fostered hubris, which was sinful and gave rise to fascism. But Barth's apparently deontological approach wasn't naively anti-reason or pro-revelation; indeed, in 2001 Stanley Hauerwas turned the subsequent debate about Barth's position on its head by declaring Barth to be a true natural theologian.

In 1953-54 Paul Tillich expanded on the cardinal principles of existentialism: being, human care, and asking questions. Most significantly, he proposed God to be the "ground of being". In 1966 Rudolf Bultmann, a student of Heidegger, urged the "demythologising" of the New Testament, concluding that what counted for

early Christians, the writers of biblical texts, and Christians today, is the existential encounter with God, not the historical stories, miracles or proofs about God's work in time or place. In 1983 John Macquarrie, an expert on Heidegger, continued this radical interrogation of existence and advocated what he called "philosophies of personal being".

As the twentieth century advanced, it became obvious that science had limits, and equally that "scientism", the ideology that puts science foremost in human affairs, was increasing. In 1950–52 Charles Raven challenged the objectivity of much scientific argument, pointing out the vested interests that framed the research questions, methods, results and conclusions of scientists. In 1951–52 Michael Polanyi warned against the consequences of scientism and advocated that science be independent of all political and military agendas, even democratic ones. In 1957 Carl Weizsäcker warned that science risked taking on the trappings of a "false religion" and questioned whether the "ambiguity" of science always led to truth or produced something good. "The role of priest does not become the scientist," he said, "and good scientists know that."

The hermeneutical boundaries of science were also becoming apparent. Scientific "facts" are combined with human interpretations, and are therefore framed by human bias, so if it is fair to draw atheistic conclusions from science then why not theological and metaphysical ones as well? Until recently, an almost normative prejudice inhabiting modern science was the assumption that the mind–body dualism of Aristotle, which framed the Western intellectual tradition until after the Enlightenment, was no longer credible. But the Nobel laureate Charles Sherrington, who gave his Gifford Lectures in 1937–38, reminded his audience that the maligned and dismissed "ghost in the machine" was still a concrete scientific mystery, and we are still asking ourselves the same question, about how the mind attached itself to the body, which Aristotle asked 2300 years ago. In 1979, another Nobel laureate, John Eccles, revived the mind–brain controversy by presenting a scientific argument for the soul, calling his hypothesis "dualist-interactionism" or the interaction of the material and the mental.

In 2004, Antony Flew, the famous atheist turned theist, declared that the findings of modern science—from life's origins to a fine-tuned universe—persuaded him that God existed. "It could be a person in the sense of a being that has intelligence and a purpose," he said, while still rejecting the afterlife. In 1979, Sydney Brenner, another Nobel laureate, who discovered the RNA messenger molecule that assisted the reproduction of DNA, presented a purely materialist case for the remarkable power of the molecular world. There was a

moral and hopeful side to a mechanistic view of biology, he argued, for the mastery of genetic mechanisms could well vanquish disease and the suffering that accompanied it.

In 1992–93 Arthur Peacocke argued that despite advances in the mechanics of genetics, the "reductionist" method in biology—reducing explanations to the smallest machinelike parts—still couldn't explain the phenomenon of life. Every time biology reduced "life" to the next smallest part, it seemed to become more complex and elusive than before. In 1997–98 Holmes Rolston III, another anti-reductionist, proposed that genetic mechanisms were necessary, but not sufficient, to explain the depth of values in both nature and human culture.

SCIENCE IS CHANGING, then, as is any evidence that supports the dialogue between science and religion. By the power of anti-reductionist arguments, nature has stayed open, but to what kind of deity? The current debate revolves around two primary options: a God of process philosophy and theology, and the omniscient and omnipresent God of theism.

Freeman Dyson, a scientific humanist who gave the Giffords in 1983–85, followed Whitehead's and Hartshorne's legacy and argued for a God who is neither omniscient nor omnipotent but who learns and grows as the universe unfolds. In 1984 the prominent theologian Jürgen Moltman developed this theme in an ecological way, avoiding any Socinian implications by skilfully negotiating the nuances of pan-en-theism. In 1970–71 Eric Mascall skilfully defended the neo-Scholastic view, believing that classical arguments for God's existence and the realistic metaphysics of Aquinas still had relevance. For Mascall, natural theology's task is to present an unchanging Creator, not a Being in flux. A changeless God gives permanence to a world that changes; a timeless God offers what a believer might expect of an almighty Being. A God who knows every instant, past, present and future has a vastly greater scope for his compassion and his power than a God who can only attend to one moment at a time.

This review of Witham's book misses a great many significant Gifford Lecturers: Hannah Arendt, Owen Chadwick, Frederick Copleston, Ninian Smart, Iris Murdoch, David Daiches, Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre, Raimundo Panikkar, Ian Barbour, Mary Douglas, James Barr, George Steiner, Mary Warnock, John Polkinghorne, David Tracy, and the awesome list goes on and on.

Witham has done an admirable job of introducing the general reader to a significant subject. His book is immensely useful and highly recommended to *Quadrant* readers.