

*A Scientific Theology. Volume 1: Nature.* By Alister E. McGrath. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., and Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 2001. xx + 325 pages. \$40.00.

Alister McGrath titles the first volume in his trilogy with a word he quite dislikes: *nature*. Here is a postmodern evangelical, deconstructing everybody else and discovering the objectivity of his own Christian view: that “nature” so-called is really God’s “creation.” The latter word would have been a more accurate title than the much-dismissed “nature.”

McGrath is bright; this is a learned survey of historical ideas of creation and nature, as becomes an Oxford professor of historical theology. I envy his knowledge of the forming and reforming of ideas over many centuries. I am rather more sympathetic with “nature” but not unsympathetic with a version of his general project. I do something of the same thing myself. In fact, everyone who thinks his or her views are true has to argue away the myriad conflicting views as some kind of error.

Here is the argument in sum:

The present analysis will develop the argument that the concept of “nature” is a socially mediated notion, not an objective entity in its own right. Unless the potentially meaningless or conceptually fluid notion of “nature” is given an ontological foundation through the more rigorous Christian doctrine of creation, the continued appeal to “nature” is without intellectual justification or merit. The Christian doctrine of creation is perhaps the only viable means by which the notion of “nature” may be salvaged, and placed on a sustainable intellectual foundation. Without an ontological foundation, “nature” is simply one person’s construction and projection, and what is “natural” a restatement of that person’s own moral vision, which has been read into—and not out of—an ethically and philosophically amorphous world. (p. 87)

So McGrath is enthusiastic about what the social constructionists have revealed, exposing how the environmentalists have their agenda, whether conservationists, preservationists, or ecofeminists, and how the resource users, economists, and developers have theirs. “The concept of ‘nature’ is a serious candidate for the most socially conditioned of all human concepts” (p. 88). “One does not ‘observe’ nature; one constructs it” (p. 113). In “the book of nature” too “there is nothing outside the text” (pp. 110–21). The facts of science are theory-laden; all seeing is “seeing as” (Norwood R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1961]).

Different cultures have their different concepts of nature. The term is fluid, vague, plastic, and unstable. In the West especially, McGrath likes C. S. Lewis’s remark that nature is a term “we” (Western men) use to describe what we have mastered, and hence concepts of nature as a machine or feminine (pp. 105–10). “Yellowstone Park [a social construction] is not allowed to manage itself; it is managed by well-intentioned human beings” (p. 114, citing Alston Chase). Similarly with the American idea(l) of “wilderness,” defined as a place absent humans (p. 83). (Never mind that Lewis’s definition does not fit the environmentalists very well). Somehow even the Atlantic Ocean is constructed now that we fly over it in airplanes (pp. 114–15).

But wait; the natural sciences cannot be deconstructed so easily; they are a “serious headache” (pp. 121–24) for the postmodernists. So now, although those who speak of “nature” or “wilderness” are merely using constructs interpreting nature, the physicists and biologists are not; they are discovering what is really there. The natural sciences, McGrath could have noticed, do a good deal of constructing to help with their observing (constructing radio telescopes or relativity theory).

Even here McGrath is cautious: these physicists and biologists have a tendency to become “naturalists,” who think that nature both exists and is all there is; and if so they are constructing nature again. “In the end, naturalism is a *blik*” (p. 132), another socially constructed filter controlling the interpretation of all evidence and arguing away any possible counterevidence.

Nature is whatever we see it as, unless and until we see it to be what it really is: God’s creation. Yes, that too is an interpretive category, a “pair of spectacles” with which to look at the world (p. 137). We will then desperately need some account of why everybody else has only a projection, while Christians alone see correctly.

McGrath’s answer, beyond his appeal to revealed truth, includes the claim that the natural scientists also do see what is really there in the world: goodness, rationality, and orderedness, illustrated in the “unreasonable” (= marvelous) effectiveness and beauty of mathematics (pp. 209–14, 218–24, 232–40). There are “laws of nature” that are “universal, absolute, eternal, omnipotent” (pp. 225–32). “Simple laws govern almost all succession of events” (p. 220). A physical world of this kind known by a cognitive mind of the human kind is not self-explanatory but is a signature of God. With this “*logocentric* conception of creation” (p. 156), humans are imaging God, thinking God’s thoughts after him.

McGrath does think creation exists, and with its autonomy. “The explanatory autonomy of the created order is itself a consequence of its creation by God” (p. 171). Well, if so, then maybe to call that domain “nature” generically is not such a bad idea. Maybe some observers can see that autonomous order and integrity even if they do not see the “metaphysical fingerprints” (p. 172) that identify the Maker. Put a little differently, McGrath’s main claim is rather similar to that of Richard Fern in his *Nature, God and Humanity* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), but Fern welcomes rather than dismisses the insights of secular thinkers who discover values in nature. Only he goes on also to argue that the biblical roots of these discoveries are unacknowledged and that without these roots the valued tree of life will not stand.

Tracing the intellectual history of an idea such as natural theology or evolution by natural selection and showing that there were connections with other social forces—dislike of ecclesiastical pomp led some to favor a simpler theology of nature; Darwinism fed into social Darwinism—does not ipso facto prove that the developing idea is a social construction, primarily explained as “shaped by the social agenda” (p. 248). McGrath knows this and at times can back off. “The position adopted in this study is not that the concept ‘nature’ is totally socially or culturally constructed, but that the notion is partly shaped by socially mediated factors” (p. 133). With the latter claim no one will disagree; all the disagreement will turn on how much and where. Despite momentary caveats, McGrath’s push is toward non-Christian “nature” as nothing but social construction. “The more fundamental difficulty is that the concept of ‘nature’ lacks the epistemic autonomy

required to permit it to be, or become, a theological resource in its own right. As we have stressed throughout this work, 'nature' is itself a construct rather than something which can act as the foundation for an ideational construction" (p. 257). The autonomy is withdrawn.

I would prefer to evaluate proposals about the nature of nature as the generating and testing of hypotheses, to be tested by all parties to the debate as much for their descriptive plausibility as mediated by social forces. A concept found in both theology and biology is "genesis," denied by none, but this bridge between nature and creation is not crossed here. "Earth" is another overlooked transept concept, but is Earth as constructed as nature is?

Whether McGrath likes it or not, there is an enormous body of knowledge about nature (the forces and processes generating and sustaining the enviroing world)—astronomical, geological, meteorological, and biological sciences that are autonomous from any legitimating biblical or theological oversight. Such science is not to be explained as mostly social construction, as he recognizes. These are "publicly accessible resources" (p. 300). This is, indeed, the line that McGrath promises to take in volume 2, *Reality*. Metaphysicians, theologians included, must look to this phenomenal world; and science is far more revealing about the detail of this than theology is. Nor, despite the theological claim that humans are epistemically fallen (pp. 286–94), is there any particular reason to worry that the sciences constructed by these scientists (astronomers, geologists, meteorologists, biologists) are epistemically corrupted by the fact that these scientists are also sinners.

Is there a natural theology? Yes—in the end; mostly no en route. "A natural theology, which sees nature as a creation, has an important role in a scientific theology" (p. 294). That is where we are headed, but most of those who have attempted a natural theology have to be dismissed before we can arrive at this conclusion. Now it seems that the Christians have wandered around in search of "natural theology" as much as have the philosophers and naturalists in search of "nature."

McGrath legitimates natural theology as a subdiscipline within his revealed (and "scientific") theology (p. 282), though why this should not rather be called "theology of creation" is obscure. Its place is not to prove that God exists but to reinforce the plausibility of an already existing faith (p. 267). The "neutral observer" (p. 284) cannot find any knowledge of God by studying nature. "It is only when the theologian has deconstructed nature—that is to say, identified the ideological constraints which have shaped the manner in which 'nature' is conceived—and recovered a Christian construal of the natural order that a proper 'natural theology' may be restored" (pp. 285–86). Everybody else has "constructed" an ideology, but Christians have a construal which sees the truth.

Of course skeptics will reply that one could just as plausibly say that Christians are biased by faith, and this looks equally like construction. Karl Barth denies natural theology when confronting the Nazis, and this looks as socially constructed as any other idea in the book (pp. 267–72).

There will not be any natural theology unless the Bible licenses it, and the Bible, which is without the word "nature," has only a weak natural theology; those who know Yahweh from the Torah can also find further glory of God in awe of creation (p. 259). McGrath minimizes the classical biblical passages that seem

to permit the Gentiles to have some knowledge of nature or nature's God (Paul on Mars' Hill adapted his rhetoric to his audience).

The concepts of chaos and disorder are discussed, revealingly, in a discussion of sin. McGrath wonders "whether the disordering to be discerned within the natural world . . . can be regarded as reflecting or resting upon a concept of sin." There is "emergent disorder within a primordially ordered cosmos." Following T. F. Torrance, McGrath holds that "the universe has fallen into disorder . . . and thus requires 'redemption from disorder'. . . . Sin affects the very fabric of creation. . . . The extent of this disordering is such that divine transformation of the cosmos is required to realign it with the divine intentions and goals—a transformation which is brought about through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by which the 'reordering of creation' may be initiated" (pp. 289–90). "Redemption must be understood to embrace the whole created order, which has now fallen into disorder, and not simply humanity" (p. 176).

Two ideas here are not kept apart as well as they might be. One is that nature itself has fallen, which has some connection with sin. The other is that humans have fallen, and sin distorts their cognitive capacities when viewing nature. If nature has ontologically fallen, we would like to know when this took place, since on the evolutionary scale humans appear late, and the fundamental processes of nature—life and death, speciation, extinction, genetic coding, predation, ecosystemic food chains—do not seem to have altered with the arrival of immoral humans. There is no serious support in any science for a nature ontologically corrupted by any connection with human sin. The astronomical, geological, meteorological, evolutionary, and ecological processes are what they are and were so for millennia before humans appeared on the planet.

McGrath was once a biologist; we are reminded of his Oxford Ph.D. in molecular biophysics, and he cites his work in the field. Given that previous incarnation, for a "scientific theology" there is surprisingly little engagement with biology. One would never know that the human genome was being sequenced while this book was being written. "Gene" and "genetics" do not appear in the index; nor does "evolution," or "adapted fit." No reader could guess the main contentions either within biology or in the dialogue with theologians. The sociobiologists challenging religion with their selfish genes, such as Richard Dawkins and E. O. Wilson, are barely mentioned (pp. 252, 304); Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson defending the evolution of altruism are not here at all. Stuart Kauffman, John Bonner, and Christian de Duve exploring how nature is self-organizing—not here. John Maynard Smith, the best of theoretical biologists, on the origins of increasing order; Stephen Jay Gould, the most outspoken paleontologist, on the sheer contingency of evolution; Francisco Ayala, distinguished geneticist active in the biology/religion exchange—not here. Michael Ruse? Only in a footnote or two, in passing (pp. 31, 132). Ian Barbour, dean of the science-religion dialogue? Dismissed in a few paragraphs (pp. 38–39, 71).

McGrath celebrates the rationality of the physical world with its universal and absolute laws of nature. He does not address, indeed he does not seem to know, the widespread observation that in biology there are no laws of nature, only locally earthbound generalizations. Order mixes with disorder. Biology is not elegant—so Frances Crick has complained. What is one to say of messy phenomena such as the catastrophic extinctions? or of the balanced polymorphism that trades

off protection against malaria at the price of liability to sickle-cell anemia? The theodicy in Mark Wynn's *God and Goodness* (Routledge, 1999) takes suffering in creation far more seriously.

Reading McGrath, one would not know that one of the surprising developments in biology over the last quarter century has been the intense advocacy by biologists for conservation in the midst of a biodiversity crisis. The natural scientists have been as ready to be nonanthropocentric as the Christian theologians have; the Society for Conservation Biology has been better at this than has the World Council of Churches.

Despite my misgivings, I found McGrath stimulating and insightful. "There is a fundamental resonance—but nothing more—between nature and theology, with the latter offering a prism through which the former may be viewed and understood" (p. 295). Yes, nature is not finally self-explanatory or "self-authenticating" (p. 295). Christians do have a prism that diffracts, analyzes, and enlightens what scientists and naturalists discover. But theology that is not diffracted by their discoveries is unenlightening about nature.

HOLMES ROLSTON, III  
Department of Philosophy  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, CO 80523