

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

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Edited by

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Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983, xi–xii.

Williams, Delores S. "Sin, Nature, and Black Women's Bodies." In Carol Adams, ed. *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*. New York: Continuum, 1993, 24–9.

See also: Christianity (7d) – Feminist Theology; Environmental Justice and Environmental Racism; Walker, Alice.

Christianity (7h) – Natural Theology

Natural theology in its most general sense refers to the study of God and God's attributes as these can be interpreted from the study of God's "works." Natural theology emerges from the medieval theological distinction between "nature" and "revelation" (including revealed scripture) as the two primary means of knowledge of the divine. In Catholic thought, this distinction is preserved in the "natural law" tradition, which is understood to be complementary to, but not to be separate from, the tradition of revelation.

Natural theology in its fundamental sense does not originally refer to theology "about" the physical world, but rather, to the epistemological distinction between what may be known through revelation (in the Bible or through divine miracles) and what may be known through "natural" means (the application of human reason). But because human reason is directed toward the physical world, as well as toward human nature, and because investigating the physical world and the human self are both means of gaining further knowledge of the divine, "natural theology" has often come to refer not only to the way of knowing (using the "natural" faculty of human reason), but also to one of the primary objects of inquiry (the natural, physical world).

In the Euro-American context in which it developed, natural theology came to be understood to be a scholarly discipline of its own (this was resisted by Catholics and some Protestants in earlier periods, in part out of concern that natural theology could lead to the rejection of revelation, or worse, to skepticism and atheism). With roots in earlier centuries, natural theology flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly with the publication of John Ray's *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (1691), William Derham's *Physico-Theology* (1713), and, later, Archbishop William Paley's popularization of Ray's and Derham's work in his *Natural Theology* (1802). More broadly, the importance of natural theology in demonstrating the "reasonableness" of Christianity was elaborated and popularized in the essays of John Locke. These works all sought to illustrate the intelligence, wisdom and beneficence of God through a close analysis of the systematic workings and perfectly ordered beauty of the natural world.

Among scientific works that might also be included in

this category are the "Bridgewater Treatises" (1831), a series of eight treatises authored by prominent British scientists, and, earlier, Linnaeus' essay "The Oeconomy of Nature" (1749), which gave its European and American audience an early picture of hydrological cycles and ecological niches. While intended as a scientific treatise, Linnaeus' work set out also to illuminate the essential orderliness of the natural world and to reason from such order the intelligence and perfection of the divine Creator. At the same time, it established the scientific groundwork for what would later become the field of "ecology" as it was coined by Ernest Haeckel in 1866. In contrast to Linnaeus, Ray and Paley saw themselves primarily as theologians, but they encouraged the study of nature as a way to map the mind of God.

As a field of study in the emerging Enlightenment, natural theology demonstrated the extent to which the intellectual preoccupations of scientists and theologians were deeply intertwined. At the same time, however, the increasing popularity of natural theology also anticipated the development of secular science and secularization more broadly, by encouraging the rational study of natural laws and by employing metaphors of nature as a mechanized system. Such dominant metaphors and approaches to study would later be perpetuated by scientists without reference to a Divine Intelligence as the creator of such orderly systems.

The ecological legacies of natural theology are also complex and mixed. On the one hand, Ray's and Paley's work encouraged the close study and appreciation of nature as a significant aspect of the cultivation of a virtuous Christian life. Such encouragement also included an emphasis on human humility with respect to other wonders of God's creation. The importance of studying nature as an aspect of a responsible Christian life has been emphasized by contemporary ecologically oriented theologians such as Sallie McFague and James Nash.

Sallie McFague's theological work, for instance, emphasizes the importance of attentiveness toward nature and argues that learning about natural theology can return Christians to an ancient theological tradition in which nature played an important role in Christian spirituality. While emphasizing natural theology in its medieval forms (rather than in Enlightenment, more mechanistic, articulations) McFague sees natural theology as an important counterbalance to the anthropocentric aspects of the Christian tradition.

James Nash argues that the natural law tradition (of which natural theology is a part) has been focused historically – and ironically – on human nature, but now must be extended to include nonhuman nature as a source of moral insight and guidance. He suggests that the natural law tradition of "following nature" can be used effectively today when "ecosystemic compatibility" is used as a norm from which to derive ethics.

Similarly, the call for humility and a check of human control of nature has been articulated, not only by Nash and McFague, but also by Dieter Hessel, Rosemary Ruether, Calvin DeWitt, Gordon Kaufman, Larry Rasmussen and Drew Christiansen, as well as philosophers, Holmes Rolston, III and Paul Taylor. Whether intentionally or otherwise, these authors have drawn on the natural theology tradition, albeit with less of a sense of Enlightenment optimism than we find in earlier periods. Changes in our scientific knowledge have also contributed to skepticism with respect to the fixed “laws of nature” and the need to make more modest claims.

The legacy of natural theology, then, includes an appreciation of nature as a means of knowing the divine and a commitment to studying nature that goes beyond the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake. While the link between natural theology and Christian theology is not always direct – and sometimes the term “natural theology” is used without a sense of its philosophical history – there remain important family resemblances between this older theological tradition and contemporary ecological theology.

On the other hand, with the increasing use of technological metaphors for the physical world (nature as a clock or a system of gears) and the corresponding confidence in human reason as a divinely provided key to “unlock” nature’s secrets, natural theology also has played a role in the cultural development of Enlightenment models of the domination and mastery of nature for human use. To the extent that the Enlightenment fostered skepticism with respect to religion and a human sense of mastery over nature that was soon to be articulated in the rise of technology and industrialism, natural theology, ironically perhaps, has played an intellectual role in utilitarian readings of nature and, to a certain extent, has indirectly influenced destructive practices. In contemporary ecological theologies today, however, the potentially problematic legacies of natural theology are largely muted and the natural theology tradition is often being rehabilitated for ecological use.

Rebecca Kneale Gould

Further Reading

- Byrne, Peter. *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Dillenberger, John. *Protestant Thought and Natural Science*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988 (2nd edn).
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980.
- Worster, Donald. *Nature’s Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985 (2nd edn); San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977.

See *also*: Book of Nature; Deism; Haeckel, Ernst; McFague, Sallie; Natural Law and Natural Rights.

SP Christianity (7i) – An Evangelical Perspective on Faith and Nature

Evangelicalism is a branch of Protestant Christianity that holds that the Bible and its 66 canonical books are vital for faith and practice and the authoritative source for defining how rightly to live on Earth. Its adherents believe that the good news of the Bible should not be selfishly kept, but proclaimed, this reflecting the Greek derivation of “evangelical,” from *eu* (true) and *angelis* (a messenger, or bearer of news). This news is *good* and it is *good* for every creature. It is *good* because it brings restoration and reconciliation of all things, countering and undoing human-wrought degradation. The reach of this gospel is as great as is human-wrought degradation; its blessings flow “far as the curse is found.” The restorative reach of the second Adam (Jesus Christ) is as great as the damaging reach of the first Adam, evangelicals believe.

At the heart of the good news proclaimed in evangelicalism is salvation. Salvation is a saving from degradation offered to those who are willing to follow in the footsteps of Jesus as savior and reconciler. Those who believe this good news bring joyful service to humanity, to every creature, and to all creation. It is service that works to fulfill the eager expectation of the whole creation for the coming of God’s children. Evangelicals – the bringers of good news in the footsteps of Jesus – are honest in describing the way things really are, are visionary toward the way things ought to be, and are followers who bring food and the means of its production to the hungry, heal the sick and bring the means of healing, and work to restore degraded aspects of creation, engaging with others to reconcile all things. While evangelicalism usually is associated with specific churches and denominations, evangelicals can be found in nearly every Christian denomination.

A distinctive feature of evangelicalism is that it distrusts human authority and societal hierarchy. This distrust is reflected in its congregations and institutional polity, with many congregations operating as independent entities, others loosely organized in associations, and some joined together in denominations with very limited hierarchy. Many in the United States are associated with the National Association of Evangelicals, but not all. In evangelicalism there is no “word from above” from prelates or pontiffs. Instead there is the Word – the Bible. Consequently evangelicals engage in serious and continuing Bible study, individually and in fellowship with others, to discover biblical teachings and apply them to their lives, society and the rest of creation. This fear of earthly authority sometimes is associated with limited