

1988

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Recommended Citation

Long, Eugene Thomas (1988) "Lord Gifford and his Lectures: The First Year (1888-1889)," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol23/iss1/4>

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Eugene Thomas Long

Lord Gifford and his Lectures: The First Year (1888-1889)



During the academic session, 1888-1889, the first Gifford Lectures in natural theology were delivered at three of the then four Scottish Universities, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Saint Andrews. During the following year the first Aberdeen lectures were given. Now one hundred years and more than 150 lecturers later, the Gifford Lectures are recognized by many as the most distinguished lecture series in the world. Lecturers have come from many different fields as the names James Frazer, Werner Heisenberg, Arnold Toynbee, Albert Schweitzer, Josiah Royce and Rudolf Bultmann suggest and most of the lectures have been published.

Some of the published versions of the lectures such as William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality* have become classics in the field of natural theology. Many of the lecturers have been intent on advancing the field of natural theology. Others such as the philosopher A.J. Ayer and the theologian Karl Barth have been mainly critical of the enterprise of natural theology. Some of the lectures may now be looked upon as period pieces. Many, however, represent important contributions to the field and the Gifford

Lectures have helped keep the subject alive when the whole concept of natural theology was being challenged by both philosophers and theologians.

The Gifford Lectures were established by the will of Lord Adam Gifford, an Edinburgh solicitor and judge, who at his death in 1887 bequeathed the sum of 80,000 pounds for lectureships in natural theology at the four Scottish universities. Although in ancient times, natural theology tended to be contrasted with civil theology, more typically natural theology is contrasted with revealed theology. In both cases, however, natural theology refers to general reflection on religion independent of appeals to special revelation or the authority of a particular history or tradition. One might say that in the broadest sense natural theology attempts to build bridges between secular and religious views of self and world.

Gifford was neither a philosopher nor a theologian, but he did display a keen interest in intellectual questions about religion and lectured to various literary and philosophical societies on topics ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Jurisprudence to Hinduism. He read ancient and modern philosophy as well as poetry and while suffering from paralysis during the last seven years of his life, he was absorbed in the study of western and non-western systems of philosophy and religion. He made no secret of the fact that his studies had led him to surrender some beliefs which he had been reared to consider essential to Christian faith. His own attitudes towards religion are summarized in one of his papers on Emerson where he writes:

The truth is, that although in education and elsewhere we may try to separate secular from sacred, and provide time-tables and conscience clauses and so on, religion will not be separated from anything whatever. It will penetrate every cranny and pervade every space, and it will flow around and through every subject and every substance like electricity.¹

That Gifford was interested in drawing connections between ordinary and scientific views of the world on the one hand and religious views on the other is manifested in the directions that he gave for the establishment of the lectures. According to his will, natural theology was to be conceived in the widest sense. The lecturers were directed to "treat their subject as a strictly natural science, the greatest of all possible sciences, indeed, in one sense the

only science, that of Infinite Being, without reference to or reliance upon any supposed exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation." Further the lecturers were not to be subjected to any test of belief. The lecturers could be of any denomination or of none; they could be religious or of no religion. It was only required that they be "able, reverent men, true thinkers, sincere lovers of and earnest inquirers after truth." The lectures were also to be public and open to the whole community.

At the time of the first Gifford Lectures, natural theology in Great Britain generally referred to the traditional arguments for the existence of God as exemplified in the work of William Paley. But developments in the empirical sciences and in the empirical type of philosophy which dominated British thought in the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth centuries had called natural theology in this form into question. The latter part of the eighteenth century and the first three quarters of the nineteenth century were dominated by empirical and scientific attitudes arising from scientific research and philosophical discussions of the nature of knowledge. The work of such scientists as John Dalton, Michael Faraday, and John Joule had resulted in a new and more comprehensive vision of the material world. And the work of Lamarck, Darwin and others emphasized the natural development of the species from more primitive forms.

The idea of evolution, as is well known, was not unique to Darwin. Indeed, one year prior to the publication of *Origin of the Species*, the philosopher, Herbert Spencer, had drawn up a plan for *A System of Synthetic Philosophy* based on the idea of progress or evolution. But it was the extensive research of Darwin that gave empirical grounding to the theory of evolution and the work of Huxley brought evolutionary theory to the attention of the general public. Because of such developments which tended to lend support to materialistic theories of reality, it became increasingly difficult during the second half of the nineteenth century to find a place for the world of the spiritual. Herbert Spencer attempted to do so, but his more positivistic frame of mind could make a place for the spiritual only in the realm of the unknowable.

Empirical methodologies, however, were not limited to the sciences. Following the Protestant revolution and its challenge of the authority of the Church in religious matters, the Bible, understood as the infallible and essentially self-interpreting revelation of divine truth,

had become for many the final authority in religious matters. This belief survived into the eighteenth century until it was challenged by historical and critical approaches to the Biblical texts. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, first on the continent and then in Britain, Biblical scholars challenged some of the factual claims of the Biblical texts, pointed to parallel texts in other traditions, showed that many texts were written and edited later than had been supposed, and pointed to inconsistencies in the Biblical record. In 1860, controversy was created in England when some Anglican churchmen argued in *Essays and Reviews* that the Bible should be treated as any other book. And the 1875 edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* carried an article by the Scottish Free Church scholar, W. Roberston Smith, arguing a similar theme. Smith and other Scottish Biblical scholars were thoroughly familiar with Biblical scholarship on the continent but this article brought this to the attention of the general public. Smith was tried for heresy and in 1881 was dismissed from his Chair at Aberdeen.

Concurrent with the development of the historical and critical approach to the Biblical sources was a rapid growth in the knowledge of other cultures and religions resulting from philosophical, historical and anthropological studies. Stimulated by the idea of human evolution and challenges to the Biblical story of creation, attention was given to the scientific description and interpretation of various peoples and cultures and this led to increased awareness of diverse religious traditions. Efforts were made to trace historically the evolution of religious concepts and comparisons were drawn between the Judaeo-Christian and the so-called primitive religions. These studies often challenged Christian claims to uniqueness and authority. It is no accident that among the early Gifford lecturers were several anthropologists and historians of religion.

The empirical philosophy of Locke, Berkeley and Hume had for the most part dominated British philosophy in the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth centuries, John Stuart Mill being its leading nineteenth century representative. This approach to philosophy often presented challenges to natural and revealed theology. John Locke had divided ideas into two kinds, sensation and reflection. The ideas of sensation were said to come through the senses and the ideas of reflection were derived from the mind's observations of its own operations on ideas presented in sensation. This meant that all ideas are derived from the

senses and these ideas were said to be caused by things external to the mind. Ideas stand for or represent things existing in the world.

Bishop Berkeley argued that Locke's position separated ideas from the reality of things and that this led to scepticism about our perception or understanding of real things in ordinary as well as religious knowledge. The way to overcome this scepticism said Berkeley was to accept that what we know are our ideas and that what we call an object is actually an idea or a collection of ideas. Things exist in their being perceived. According to Berkeley, Locke's speaking of objects independent of our ideas of objects could only lead to confusion and meaningless claims since ultimately Locke's objects are unknown and unknowable. The Scottish philosopher, David Hume, was to take this position even further arguing that on Locke's view there was also no reason for accepting belief in an independent mind. Hume's well known *Dialogues on Natural Religion* also called into question the traditional arguments for the existence of God and challenged much that had been treated under the heading of natural theology.

The Scottish School of Common Sense represented best by Thomas Reid was seen by many to offer an alternative to the subjective idealism of Berkeley and the empirical scepticism of Hume and the tendency of both to separate self from world and God. On Reid's account we cannot prove, but nevertheless are forced to believe by the constitution of our nature that what we perceive are things existing independently of mind. On the same grounds, he argued, we are forced to believe in self-identity and other minds. To deny these beliefs is to engage in the absurd. Although Reid did not hold that these beliefs depended on belief in God, he did maintain that the explanation of our common sense beliefs depended upon our nature being constituted by God. Reid's position places great weight on belief in a fundamental constitution of ourselves and did not satisfy many who sought a more secure foundation for overcoming the sceptical tendencies of the age. Another Scot, Sir William Hamilton, sought to overcome some of the problems in Reid's thought but his Kantian emphasis upon the Absolute as unknowable placed even more burden upon belief and in the eyes of some led to another form of scepticism.

At the time of the first Gifford Lectures then, many of the intellectual supports for religious faith seemed to have been called into question and scepticism was a dominant mood. Consciousness of self appeared to be divorced from

consciousness of the external world. Religious consciousness or consciousness of the Infinite was divorced from consciousness of the finite and the religious was divorced from the secular. The older tradition of natural theology had been called into question by Hume, Kant and others and the prospects for natural theology seemed dim. However, some new intellectual forces were in the wind in Scotland and we get some insight into these forces in the first year of the Gifford Lectures.

Of the first Gifford Lecturers, two were Scots, Andrew Lang being among them.² Lang was born in 1844 in Selkirk and spent his earliest years reading folk tales and roaming the hills in the borderlands of Scotland. Said to be somewhat bookish in nature, he was sent at age ten to the Edinburgh Academy and in 1861 he enrolled in Saint Andrews University. Along the way he read among others the works of Scott, Pope, Dickens, and Longfellow. After reading Homer he also developed an intense interest in classical learning and in his later years he translated the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and published several books on Homer. Early in 1863 he left Saint Andrews for Glasgow University where he hoped to qualify for a Snell Exhibition at Balliol College, Oxford. This goal was achieved and in the Michaelmas term of 1864, he matriculated at Balliol. The idealist philosopher, T.H. Green, served as Lang's tutor and Lang developed a deep respect and affection for the classical scholar, Benjamin Jowett, which lasted long after Lang left Oxford.

Little is known about Lang's seven years at Merton College where he was elected a Probationer in 1868 but records show that he was reading anthropology as well as literature. Lang was particularly attracted to the anthropological work of Edward Burnett Tylor although in his Gifford Lectures he would challenge Tylor's claim that animism was the foundation from which all religion developed. In 1875 Lang moved to London to follow a journalistic career and he spent the remainder of his life there.

Andrew Lang wrote on many diverse subjects representing his wide range of interests. In addition to many reviews, essays and poems, Lang was a pioneer in comparative anthropology, a field that at this time was for the most part investigated outside the realm of university supported subjects. Lang's approach to anthropology was less scientific in the strict sense and was rooted in literature and folklore, an interest that can be traced back to his boyhood days in Selkirk. He was a founder and early

president of the Folk-Lore Society but he was also a founding member of the Society for Psychical Research, an organization that counted among its members many leading philosophers and psychologists. These two interests, anthropology and psychical research, form the immediate background to his Gifford Lectures delivered at Saint Andrews during the 1888-1889 academic session.

Much of Lang's work in anthropology was of a polemical nature and his Gifford Lectures continue in that tradition. In the published version of his lectures, *The Making of Religion*, he begins by summarizing the conclusion which he says is presented by the field of the History of Religions with an air of authority:

Man derived the conception of 'spirit' or 'soul' from his reflections on the phenomena of sleep, dreams, death, shadows, and from the experience of trances and hallucinations. Worshipping first the departed souls of his kindred, man later extended the doctrine of spiritual beings in many directions. Ghosts, or other spiritual existences fashioned in the same lines, prospered till they became gods. Finally, as the result of a variety of processes, one of these gods became supreme, and, at last was regarded as the one only God. Meanwhile man retained his belief in the existence of his own soul, surviving after the death of the body, and so reached the conception of immortality. Thus the ideas of God and of the soul are the result of early fallacious reasonings about misunderstood experiences.³

Lang's Gifford Lectures challenged the received wisdom of the History of Religions on two accounts. First he calls into question the materialistic conception of reality which he believed to dominate much of the work in this field. By a method of comparing the customs and manners of civilized races with those of so-called primitive or savage races, he attempts to show that such supernormal experiences as clairvoyance, thought transference, and telepathy cannot be easily dismissed as mere fables. These kinds of experiences, he argues, may represent just the kind of facts on which the primitive doctrine of soul may be based. Second, by collecting and comparing accounts of the high gods and creative beings believed in by most primitive tribes, Lang challenges the received view that the

conception of god is derived from or evolved from reflections on spirits and ghosts of ancestors.

Lang makes it clear that he is dealing with probable explanations, but he is intent on challenging what he considers to be a dogmatic presentation and discussion of the origins of religion which overlooks or ignores available evidence. If his two arguments can be sustained, the standard view, even if supported by leading scholars, will have to be reconsidered. Lang acknowledges that his first thesis goes against the grain of contemporary scientific and materialistic views and that he can at best provide a probable explanation of the data. But he argues that his two theses are independent of each other and that even if the first is rejected as improbable, the second, based on evidence of a different kind, might still be maintained.

Lang is careful to say that reports of supernormal experiences should not be accepted without careful analysis. He believes, however, that Tylor and other anthropologists reject such reports out of hand and in violation of procedures followed in anthropological studies. Usually anthropologists follow the test of the recurrence of similar reports in different and unrelated places and ages as a means for judging the value of the evidence. In his study Lang collects stories of primitive beliefs about visions, hallucinations and so on which are associated with claims to knowledge not obtainable through normal channels of sense knowledge. He then compares these with similar stories among living and highly educated peoples. In this way he proposes to study what he calls the X region of human nature, the region of miracles, prophecy and visions which is associated with the major religions and major religious leaders.

Lang argues, for example, that clairvoyance or what the Zulus call "opening the gates of distance" is widely reported in diverse cultures and ages and that this ability to have knowledge of events remote to the knower is attributed to many, including many saints. We may not be able to confirm or deny primitive explanations of such experiences in terms of wandering spirits. But we might be able to understand how primitive man arrived at such beliefs or explanations and how he might have found confirmation for such beliefs in other supernormal experiences. Further, argues Lang, if we cannot totally discount reports of clairvoyance which have been sifted through a well educated and modern intelligence we are in no position to dismiss primitive data out of hand just because it conflicts with the prevailing theory of materialism. Indeed such experiences

may provide evidence that the idea of the spiritual is rooted in actual experiences and that the materialistic account of man and world is less than adequate.

Lang's second and perhaps more important argument addresses the question of the origins of the ideas of the gods. On the standard account, the idea of ghosts arises from dreams and visions. From this, based on erroneous reasoning, man is said to have developed the ideas of higher spirits, then gods, then higher gods and finally the belief that there exists only one supreme god. On this account primitive tribes had no belief in a supreme being or higher god. The idea of god was a later development evolving from nature spirits and the culture of ancestor worship. Lang challenges this view of Tylor, Huxley, Spencer and others. Based on his study of several primitive and remote cultures, Lang argues that the conception of a supreme moral being occurs in societies where ancestor worship does not occur and that some of these societies are as monotheistic as the Christian societies.

To develop his point, Lang examines in some detail several religions of the most remote and primitive races, those least contaminated by Judaeo-Christian or Islamic teaching. Among the Fuegians, for example, Lang reports the concept of a magnified, non-natural man, who walks about in the woods and mountains, who knows every word and action, who cannot be escaped and who influences the weather in accordance with man's conduct. His moral standard is much above that of the ordinary person and he cannot be explained as a deified chief because in Fuegian society one person is not superior to another. Herbert Spencer refers to this "big man" as a deceased weather doctor, but Lang argues that there is no evidence of his ever dying. Further, says Lang, we cannot explain this idea by reference to ancestor worship because there is no evidence of such among the Fuegians. In these and other cases argues Lang, it is difficult to find evidence to support the standard anthropological view that the conception of a supreme moral being developed from the idea of the ghost of an ancestor.

According to Lang, although we do not find among the most primitive peoples an abstract monotheistic conception of god, there is evidence of belief in a super creative, powerful and moral being. Further this belief is often found in juxtaposition with belief in worshipped ghosts, totems and fetiches. He recognizes, however, that in some higher forms of material culture the belief in a supreme moral being is displaced by mobs of ghosts and spirits who

attract persons' adoration, who help persons, who often are selfish and cruel and who respond to sacrifices including human sacrifices. Lang calls this a degeneration of religion, an explanation which is foreign to the standard view because on that view the moral element in primitive religion is not acknowledged.

If there is, as Lang suggests, a degeneration from a higher moral form of religion, how can this be explained? According to Lang, animism, once developed, created a powerful attraction for natural or sinful man. The supreme moral being does not favor one person or tribe over another and cannot be tempted to do so as a reward for gifts and sacrifices. Thus men and women went in search of useful ghost-gods and fetiches which would respond to their particular wants and desires. As a result, the higher moral god was neglected or came to be thought of as one deity among others. Myth making, itself an irrational activity and a product of animism according to Lang, is part of this process of setting aside the more noble religious ideas of primitive persons.

Material culture continued to develop during this period of the degeneration of religion but now the fortunes of the state and a rich and powerful clergy were bound up with the continuation of animism and the relatively non-moral systems in Greece and Rome. According to Lang, it would take the moral monotheism of Islam or Judaism to overcome this degeneration of religion. Just how far these traditions moved from animism is suggested in the Biblical prophet's saying, "Even though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." In Christianity, says Lang, we find a combination of the ideas of caring for the good of the soul and man's eternal responsibilities with the idea of the righteous and eternal god of the prophets of Israel.

Lang's approach to the Gifford Lectures followed the relatively new and still emerging social scientific method of investigation and he was criticized by some religious leaders for paying insufficient attention to religious doctrines. However in general his studies of natural religion were believed to lend support to traditional theology. The response to Max Müller's Gifford Lectures at Glasgow University was in many cases quite different, as we shall see. Müller, the German born Oxford philologist, had been a candidate for the first Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University when J.H. Stirling was elected. Shortly after Stirling was elected to that post Müller wrote to a friend that Stirling, a *bona fide* student of philosophy would tell

what natural religion would or could be or should have been. Müller, however, thought that the time for this was past and that the focus should now be on what religion has been. Shortly after the Edinburgh decision had been announced, Müller received a letter from Principal Caird inviting him to give the lectures at Glasgow.

Friedrich Max Müller was born in the town of Dessau in 1823.⁴ He was sent to the famous Nicholas School of Leipzig in 1836 and began his studies as a classical scholar at the University of Leipzig in 1841. At Leipzig Müller was attracted to the study of philosophy and attended lectures of Christian Weisse and Rudolf Hermann Lotze and considered himself something of a Hegelian at the time. Following his doctoral thesis on Spinoza, Müller went to Berlin University where he was attracted by the work of the then elderly idealist philosopher, Schelling, who was lecturing on the philosophy and mythology of religion. From these thinkers Müller learned to think of the Bible as a historical text to be treated in accordance with the same critical principles that were used in studying other ancient books including the sacred texts of the East.

Having become convinced of the importance of the Rig-veda to the study of all mythological and religious theories, Müller went to Paris to attend Burnouf's lectures and to begin to copy and collate the manuscripts of the Veda and its commentaries. His interests in these texts and his study of Sanskrit coincided with a rising western interest in India. But Müller's interest in language was controlled by a philosophical thesis, that the study of language would help understand the prehistory of the human mind and the intellectual connections among the many peoples of the world.

Subsequent to a trip to the East India House in England to collate some manuscripts, the East India Company entrusted to Müller the publication of the Rig-veda. Müller settled in Oxford to do this work while lecturing on modern literature and language, devoting his leisure time to the study of philology. By the time of his Gifford Lectures Müller dominated much of the work being done in the history of religions. In the published version of his first series of Gifford Lectures, *Natural Religion*, Müller says that he will bring to the topic of natural theology the newest of the sciences, the science of religion. He describes this as a science which consists in a careful collation of the facts of religion, a comparison of religion in terms of their likenesses and differences, and an effort to discover the nature, origin and purpose of religion.

Müller's approach to the origins of religion is rooted in his understanding of what he called the science of language. In this approach we take languages as we find them, trace them back to their earliest forms, classify them and then analyze them until we arrive at root elements which can be analyzed no further. These root elements form for Müller the ultimate facts on which the study of religions is based. Then in tracing the development of words, we discover stages where meanings evolve leading through mythology to religion. Using this method Müller attempts to discover what is peculiar to each religion and what is common to all with the conviction that what is common to all constitutes the essence of religion.

Müller delayed his second course of lectures until February 1890 and following these lectures he was elected to a second two courses of lectures. These lectures were published under the titles, *Physical Religion* (1891), *Anthropological Religion* (1892), and *Psychological Religion* (1903). *Natural Religion* was understood to be of an introductory nature and fell into three divisions: (1) The definition of natural religion (2) The method for studying natural religion (3) The material available for studying natural religion. The first lectures then can be seen as a prologomena to the future lectures. In *Physical Religion* Müller studies different names derived from nature to refer to what lies beyond the limits of nature. *Anthropological Religion* is concerned with evidence of the superhuman in relation to parents and ancestors. And *Psychological Religion* is concerned with the sense of otherness or beyond associated with experiences of the self. In this essay our focus is primarily on Müller's first set of Gifford Lectures.

The first task in *Natural Religion* is that of determining what can be called religion. Müller was convinced that religious knowledge like all knowledge was rooted in sensations. Even Kant who had defended the place of pure reason over against the tendencies of Locke and Hume, had argued that apart from sensation all concepts would be empty. Knowledge, according to Müller, had to be understood in terms of sensations, precepts, concepts and names, four distinguishable albeit not separable phases of knowledge. In thinking we deal with names which embody our concepts but our concepts are rooted in percepts and our percepts in sensation. In this way Muller aligned himself with the empiricists of the age. According to Müller this process belongs to the early stage of development of the human mind as well as to our own thinking. Thus in learning

language, in learning the names of things, we are part of a cumulative history. Through language we are linked to the past.

One characteristic is said to be in common in all our percepts and hence in all our concepts and names. Our percepts refer to definite or finite objects and this is the case whether we are referring to material objects, to other persons or to ourselves as self-conscious beings. Implicit in this sense of finiteness, however, is a sense of the beyond or the infinite, a feeling of the beyond in the presence of the finite object. This sense of the beyond is said to be the most primitive and fertile source of our mythological and religious ideas but only over time did it emerge as the concept of the Infinite or Supreme Being. When, for example, the early Vedic poet praised the dawn, he did not have in mind the later abstract concept of Infinite Being, but he did intend to refer to something beyond the definite object dawn, to refer to something within or behind the dawn which reappeared day after day. In a related way, primitive man sensed a beyond or an otherness in other persons, call it breath, spirit or mind, and this led to the worship of deceased ancestors. And with reference to self-consciousness, there was a sense of the infinite which was expressed in terms of spirit or soul, an independent agent of power. In nature, man and self, then, we find references to the infinite and each of these is said to contribute to the development of what is called religion.

In the fuller sense, however, religion is said to consist "in the perception of the infinite under such manifestations as are able to influence the moral character of men."⁵ Contrary to the findings of Lang, Müller did not believe that religion in this sense could be found among primitive peoples. But he did hold that to the extent that mythology gets beyond the mere naming of powers and begins to speak of promise and sacrifice, it is on the threshold of religion. To the extent that "men begin to feel constrained to do what they do not like to do, or to abstain from what they would like to do, for the sake of some unknown powers which they have discovered behind the storm and the sky, or the sun or the moon, they are at least on religious ground."⁶

If this is what is meant by religion, how are we to study it? Natural theology understood as an effort to establish logical arguments for the existence of God had on Müller's view been discredited by critics. Müller believed with John Caird that at best the traditional arguments

demonstrated an implicit logic of religion tracing the steps by which the mind rises to consciousness of god. But Müller adds to this what he calls a logic of facts or a logic of history where one can show the mind to rise gradually and irresistably to the idea of god in the history of religion. "The true object of the Historical School," he wrote, "is to connect the present with the past, to interpret the present by the past, and to discover if possible the solution of our present difficulties by tracing them back to the causes from which they arose."⁷

Language, mythology, customs and laws and the Sacred Books of the religions are the resources for the study of this history. But language, the words in which our concepts and hence our precepts and sensations are expressed, provides for Müller the fundamental key. A study of words shows that our primitive relation to the world was not one of a subject standing over against an object. Words were originally deeds, creative acts calling into life concepts that did not previously exist. Initially man spoke of the consciousness of his own action. He might speak of himself as a striker or a digger and other beings like himself were spoken of in comparable ways. Animals were also treated as actions. Thus the word, horse, meant quick runner and the word, mouse, a thief. This relation to animals is preserved in animal fables. The word for river meant running here and the word for tree meant splitting here. In this so-called dynamic or dramatic stage in the development of language argues Müller, we find the key to animism. When persons wished to speak of what we would call objects, they did so in terms of the action roots of language. What we today think of as objects set over against us were first named in action language and in time things were talked about by analogy with human action and took on personal forms.

Myth, argues Müller, stands second only to language as a resource for studying the origins of religion and myth is said to be an inevitable stage in the development of language. The original meaning of the word, dawn, for example, was shining there, and the early formers of language would speak of dawn fleeing, wakening, sleeping and so on. Here we have the inevitable development of myth. Since dawn is followed by the sun, the sun becomes the follower, the lover, the daughter or perhaps even a veiled bride if she appeared in the clouds. Through such examples we can understand the emergence of myth but can also understand how myth may contain the germ of religion. The dawn may be said to be always the same, always returning,

never dying, immortal. And once described as immortal dawn may take on other religious attributes.

Language, then, may be said to lead to myth and from myth to religion. And the study of the roots of language helps us to identify and compare the different deities. This is done by tracing the origins of the names of various deities to see whether or not they originate in the same name. Müller was looking for the most scientific or exact way of studying the origins of religion and he believed that it is the name alone which gives continuity through the centuries, enables one to distinguish one deity from another and allows one to relate the mythological and religious ideas of cultures otherwise far distant from each other.

In studying the language and myths as well as the customs, laws and Sacred Books of the religions we learn that religion is not created de-novo, that religion is part of a long historical process. Just as laws existed before codes of laws, so religion existed before Sacred Books. This, according to Müller, is forgotten or overlooked when codes, laws or Sacred Books become fetiches requiring absolute obedience. Historical or revealed religions rest on the foundation of natural religion and the failure to recognize this is said to be one of the principal reasons for the kind of aggressive unbelief which attacks religion from all sides.

Müller's first lectures were well attended and the audience included students, faculty, ministers and persons from the community. The Glasgow student paper spoke highly of his lectures and the invitation to give a second two year course of lectures is an indication of faculty support for his work. Although one critic complained that Müller had found something good in every religion except Christianity, there was little public outcry against Müller's first set of lectures. As time went on, however, animosity from some of the Churches increased and he was accused by some ministers at a meeting of the Established Presbytery of Glasgow of spreading pantheistic and infidel views. Although Müller was for the most part defended by the scholars and the newspapers, the criticism was significant enough that Müller wrote a defence of his position in the Preface to the third volume of his lectures. That defence focused primarily on the question of his attitude toward the miraculous.

At Edinburgh, the first Gifford Lecturer was J. Hutchison Stirling. That he was invited to be a Gifford Lecturer was itself symbolic of an important change that was taking place in British philosophy during the last quarter

of the nineteenth century. In the 1877 edition of *Recent British Philosophy*, first published in 1865, David Masson wrote the following:

On the whole, my impression is that the struggle in Systematic British Philosophy, apart from Didactic Theology, is not now any longer, as it was in 1865, between Hamilton's System of Transcendental Realism *plus* a Metaphysical Agnosticism relieved by strenuous faith, and Mill's System of Empirical Idealism *plus* a Metaphysical Agnosticism, relieved by a slight reserve of possibility for Paley after all, but between Mr. Spencer's Philosophy of a Real and Knowable Cosmical Evolution blocked off from an Unknowable Absolute, and some less organized Idealistic Philosophy, described as British Hegelianism.⁸

Until the second half of the nineteenth century, Hegel was all but unknown to philosophers in Britain. German Idealism first began to make its appearance through the literary works of Coleridge, Emerson and Carlyle. And there was a group of younger philosophers and theologians growing up in the 1850s and 1860s that was unattracted to either the rigid orthodoxies of the Churches or the empirical and agnostic philosophies of the day. For many of these, the literary works of the idealists provided sustenance. Stirling was one of the earlier of these persons who would help bring about the kind of Neo-Hegelianism that would flourish particularly at the University of Glasgow and Balliol College, Oxford in the 1880s and 1890s. This movement would also spread quickly to the United States.

Stirling, born in Glasgow in 1820, never held a University position.⁹ He was a candidate for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow in 1866 when Edward Caird, a Scotsman trained at Balliol College was appointed. Caird was fifteen years younger than Stirling and did not yet have an established reputation. But he would become in time the most important of the Scottish Neo-Hegelians. Stirling was a candidate for a similar post at Edinburgh in 1868 and had the support of Carlyle and Emerson, but again he was unsuccessful. Stirling had written to John Stuart Mill requesting a testimonial for the position at Edinburgh, but Mill, who spoke well of Stirling's work on Hegel, declined to support him on the grounds that he did not "think the study

of Hegel would have a salutary effect on the 'immature minds of university students'."¹⁰

Stirling had taken his first degree at Glasgow where he won first prize in moral philosophy. But he was little motivated by the Scottish Common Sense Tradition which informed the work of his teacher, Fleming. In 1842 Stirling graduated from the College of Surgeons at Edinburgh University and for some years practiced as a surgeon in Wales. During this period he wrote a number of poems and essays which showed among other things his great admiration and sympathy for the work of Carlyle. At the death of his father in 1851, Stirling inherited a sum sufficient to enable him and his family to live completely without employment. He took advantage of this to study at the Sorbonne and in 1856 he and his family moved to Heidelberg where he studied the German language and began to read with care the works of Hegel. It would be nine years before he published *The Secret of Hegel* but from the beginning Stirling was attracted to Hegel's effort to reconcile philosophy and Christianity.

Stirling and his family returned to London in 1857 and three years later moved to Edinburgh where he spent his remaining years. The publication in 1865 of his two volume work, *The Secret of Hegel, being the Hegelian System in Origin, Principle, Form and Matter*, established Stirling's reputation and is said by many to have marked the beginning of serious study of Hegel in Great Britain. Although some critics said that if Stirling knew the secret of Hegel, he had been successful in keeping it to himself, the book was praised by a leading Hegelian, Edward Caird, who wrote that "Hegel was first introduced in the powerful statement of his principles by Dr. Hutchison Stirling."¹¹ In *The Secret*, Stirling suggests that Hegel's distinction between *Vorstellungen* and *Begriffe* provides a way forward from crude superstitions in religion on the one hand and the critics of the Enlightenment on the other hand. And this theme is echoed in Stirling's Gifford Lectures published in 1890 as *Philosophy and Theology*.

By contrast with Lang and Müller, Stirling seems reluctant to stray very far from the traditional understanding of natural theology. Theology, Stirling suggests, may be considered to be the logos of God where we mean something like a description, narrative or theory of God. A natural theology should seek to provide a narrative or description of God independent of that which is given

expressly in revelation. Stirling suggests, however, that if we look to treatises on the subject of natural theology we discover "that the attempt in all of them is to demonstrate the existence and attributes of the Deity by reason alone, in application to nature itself as it appears within us or without us."¹² He admits that natural theology understood as a consideration of the arguments for the existence of God has for some years been set aside and he admits that one who takes them up again runs the risk of being regarded as a fossil. But he suggests that little attention has been given to the historical development of the traditional arguments and that a treatment of the arguments in the context of their history would conform to the expectations of Lord Gifford and avoid an exercise that is merely antiquated.

Stirling spends much effort in the Gifford Lectures tracing the historical development of the arguments for the existence of God and criticisms of these arguments. It may be said with some justification that the emphasis on historical development is itself a Hegelian emphasis and that Stirling challenges the tendency in much philosophy of the time to separate problems under discussion from an understanding of the past. But little can be gained here from reviewing that history. Of more importance for our purposes is the suggestion of a new attitude or approach to the relation between philosophy and theology.

Stirling describes himself as a member of the National Church of Scotland, but he distinguishes between the Broad Church which emphasizes religious understanding, the High Church which emphasizes religious feeling and the low or Evangelical Church which attempts to unite understanding and feeling. Although he identifies himself with the low Church view, he abhors the tendency of each division to be intolerant of the other. The essential difference between his and the several church views, says Stirling, is that the churches possess what is called *Vorstellungen* or representations and he *Begriffe* or concepts. "What they have *positively* in the feeling or *positively* in the understanding or *positively* in the union of both, I have reflectively, or ideally, or speculatively in reason."¹³ To put this in other terms Stirling argued that the ordinary faithful thought in terms of crude pictures and figurative representations, often distorted by error and prejudice but that he through reason sought to bring the figurative expressions of faith to clearer expression and to lay a philosophical foundation for them. This theme would be taken up by several later

Gifford Lecturers standing in the Neo-Hegelian tradition, particularly John and Edward Caird.

By reason, Stirling did not mean to refer to mere intellectual understanding in the Enlightenment sense. The *Aufklärung* as expressed in the writings of Hobbes, Voltaire, Hume and others had tended to dominate discussions of religion and was generally critical of it. Enlightenment thinkers called into question symbolic representations of religious faith, but failed, according to Stirling, to see the truth behind them. Mere intellectual understanding has to do only with the conditional and the finite and anything beyond that is negated or left in the dimension of the unknowable. But reason in Hegel's and Stirling's sense refers to a speculative effort to bring differences into relation and to think the unconditioned and the infinite.

Many philosophers, according to Stirling, had given up Enlightenment attitudes and approaches one hundred years earlier, but that so-called advanced form of thinking had been taken over in recent years by the general population and every hamlet had its Tom Paine. Stirling was anxious to overcome the separation between finite and infinite, secular and religious, and feeling and understanding that was associated with the Enlightenment. Hegel's understanding of reason and thought pointed the way forward for him. Stirling described his own position as philosophical Christianity and said that this was a view which he could hold even if he occupied a Christian pulpit.

Response to Stirling's lectures was somewhat mixed. The lecture halls were filled to capacity and a reviewer of the published version of the lectures said in *Expository Times* that this was one of the most suggestive volumes on the relation between philosophy and theology that had ever appeared in Scotland. By contrast a reviewer in *Mind*, while acknowledging that Stirling said many notable and well pointed things, commented that as a whole the lectures suffer the sin of irrelevance. Stirling's lectures would have been more notable, one suspects, had he chosen to develop in more detail what he called philosophical Christianity.

At the time there were those who said that Hegelianism was an exotic interest outside the mainstream of Scottish philosophy and predicted that it would have a short life. This prediction, however, is not supported by the data. Whether one argues that Hegel and Idealism in general are outside the mainstream of Scottish philosophy or with Pringle-Pattison that it is in many ways consistent with

traditional Scottish philosophy, it is clear that the Neo-Hegelians were an important force in Scottish philosophy and natural theology through the last two decades of the nineteenth century and that Idealism in a broader sense was very influential in Scottish natural theology at least through the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁴

University of South Carolina

NOTES

1. Stanley L. Jaki, *Lord Gifford and His Lectures: A Centenary Retrospect* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 104. For biographical information on Gifford, I am indebted to Jaki's book and to the Gifford Lectures of Max Müller and J.H. Stirling. Jaki's book includes a list of Gifford Lectures through 1983-84, Gifford's will, recollections of Gifford by Gifford's brother and several of Gifford's essays. Gifford's will is included in the published version of Müller's Gifford Lectures and a list of Gifford Lectures through 1966-67 is also given in B.E. Jones, Editor, *Earnest Inquirers After Truth: A Gifford Anthology* (London 1970).
2. For biographical information on Lang, I am indebted to Roger Green, *Andrew Lang: A Critical Biography* (Leicester, 1948) and Eleanor De Selms Langstaff, *Andrew Lang* (Boston, 1978).
3. Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion* (New York and Bombay, 1898), p. 1.
4. For biographical data on Müller, I am indebted to Nirad Chaudhuri, *Scholar Extraordinary, The Life of Professor The Rt. Hon. Friedrich Max Müller, P.C.* (London, 1974), *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Muller* edited by his wife (London, 1902) and autobiographical remarks in the first volume of Müller's Gifford Lectures, *Natural Religion* (London, 1889).
5. *Natural Religion*, p. 188.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 572.

8. David Masson, *Recent British Philosophy* (London, 1877), pp. 296-97.
9. For biographical data on Stirling, I am indebted to Amelia Hutchison Stirling, *James Hutchison Stirling: His Life and Work* (London, 1912).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
11. Edward Caird, *Hegel* (Edinburgh and London, 1883), p. vi.
12. J. Hutchison Stirling, *Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1890), p. 23.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
14. This article is part of a proposed study on natural theology in Scotland and I want to thank Noel O'Rear Morton and David Miller for assistance in bibliographical research. I also want to thank Professor Foster Tait for reading and making comments on a draft of this article and Dr. and Mrs. Alistair Kee for their warm hospitality while I was working at the University of Glasgow Library.