Five Schools of Natural Theology: Reconciling Science and Religion

It . . . is almost a duty of the scientific man, however little he may desire or feel himself competent for the task, to attempt to rebuild as well as destroy, and to state, so far as he can, what is his view of the matters in which hitherto the priest and the philosopher have, with insufficient knowledge of external nature, been left to themselves.

Frederick Soddy, Science and Life (1920), 150

Introduction: The Revival of Natural Theology

Natural theology was an integral part of natural philosophy in the early modern period and up until the Enlightenment. This changed with the professionalisation of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century. Victorian scientific naturalism was forged in the context of the new profession’s boundary-work and emancipatory programme against clerical control of education and knowledge production, and in this context, theology became a “negative Other” of natural science. In addition to this, the post-Kantian philosophy of science that dominated much thinking in epistemology after the Enlightenment had clearly separated religion and science as two distinct domains, not to be conflated or mixed.

After a few decades of relative obscurity, however, natural theology re-emerged with new vitality, although not as an integrated part of research. Instead, new institutional platforms were created where scientists, philosophers and scholars could meet to discuss religious and spiritual implications of current research. In the context of new institutions, lecture platforms, and publication forums, a number of new natural theologies were forged from the raw materials provided by contemporary debates in the natural sciences. By taking scientific knowledge about the natural world as a starting point for developing new positions on human values, ethics, the afterlife, and the relation between the divine and humanity, these new natural theologies clearly broke with the dictums of a disenchanted world. In this chapter, which
concludes our discussion of the problem of disenchantment in the major scientific disciplines, we shall look closer at the systems of new natural theology that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, relate them to their scientific contexts, and discuss the major institutions and forums in which they were created.1

I will distinguish between five schools of natural theology that were present in the period between 1900 and 1939. These five schools will be presented as a series of successive speculative practices, sometimes overlapping, but generally following a historical succession that mirrors conceptual developments in the natural sciences. Some of the schools were highly influential at the time, but have since withered away or been cast into oblivion. Some influenced later streams of thought, but have largely been forgotten in their original form due to the source amnesia of later authors. Others have become canonical and foundational to schools of thought that are still very much alive today, with only minor adaptations and supplements added by later disciples.

My main objective is to explain the conditions from which these schools arose and explore their relation to each other and to broader cultural concerns. I will however also assess the fate of each school in a broader historical perspective. This will contribute to our current understanding of science-religion debates, as well as the intellectual and cultural background and scientific foundation of a number of trends that are still with us today. Before presenting each of the five schools, however, I will first discuss the major institutions that facilitated the new natural theologies. At the end of the chapter, I will suggest some striking theological trends in these schools, which reveal intriguing structural similarities with what is nowadays often seen as “Western esotericism”.2

1 The Institutions of Natural Theology

The new natural theologies of the early twentieth century were for the most part created by scientists and philosophers, with the occasional humanities scholar, theologian, and autodidact playing his3 part. If we define natural theology substantially, in terms of the intellectual effort to do speculative theology

1 This project follows up on Peter Bowler's foundational work in Reconciling Science and Religion (2001).
2 See especially Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy.
3 This is not a biased use of the personal pronoun: new natural theology has been an overwhelmingly male endeavour. This is only to be expected, as it reflects the heavily gendered nature of the academic professions at the turn of the century.