With the benefit of more than a century of hindsight on our side, the Gifford Lectures of 1989, *Creation of the Sacred*, proffers an apt occasion for reflecting on the founding will of Lord Gifford, which was to promote inquiries into "natural theology in the widest sense." Now at the close of the twentieth century, "natural theology" perforce sounds to our ears rather quaint, perhaps as antiquated and fossilized as "natural history," even as its past glory continues to be honored by the undiminished prestige of the lectureship to this day, with a long list of illustrious recipients beginning with F. Max Müller.\(^1\) This institutional tradition notwithstanding, as Burkert himself notes, both the world and the academy are different places from what they used to be at the time of Lord Gifford, and it has become considerably more difficult, it appears, to raise the question of *nature* in relation to religion, or the question of *origin* in relation to religion, for that matter.

Given the prevailing disposition of the academy today, this book is likely to be considered daring in at least two senses. First, on account of Burkert’s declared intention to inspect the "tracks of biology" in the early history of religions, thus opening, or reopening, the investigation into the species-specific, as opposed to culture-specific, sources of religion, in effect reviving, with up-to-date scientific research data, the inquiry into what Hume called a "natural history of religion." Second, on account of his rehabilitation of the idea that we might track down such transcultural sources by looking into "early religions" that presumably existed at the threshold of written history, and by speculating further back into prehistory with a help of, among other things, ethology, paleontology, and physical anthropology.

In both these respects it is possible, I suppose, to consider this work either as progressive or regressive, depending on whether one regards it as an attempt to break away from the general scholarly orientation of recent decades and to surge forward, or as an unwitting reversion.

\(^1\) Curiously, Harvard University Press makes little note of the occasion, though the proclaimed objective of the Gifford Lectures has surely more than an incidental significance to Burkert’s main argument.
to a previously abandoned line of pursuit. My purpose here is by no means to come down on one or the other side of this backward-or-forward assessment. Rather, I pose the above two points as partially overlapping rubrics under which my comments below may be organized: first, the question of how to identify “early religions” as a point of departure for speculating on the prehistory of religion, and, second, what seems to me a larger and more fundamental issue of the tracks of biology, that is, the question of how to reconnect the hitherto predominantly “culturalist” study of religion with the general study of nature and evolution.

The evocation of the founding of the Gifford Lectureship naturally recalls the inaugural series delivered by Max Müller, whose title, tellingly enough, was *Natural Religion*. A decade earlier, Müller had launched another well-known lecture series on the same general subject, the Hibbert Lectures (1878). Most students of religion are familiar with the title, if not the content, of the resulting volume, *Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India*, as it became one of the founding texts of *Religionswissenschaft*. By common accord, Müller was a pioneer in the emergent science of religion and the leading authority on the religions of ancient India. This combination of factors produced what was perhaps the inevitable result that Müller would habitually tap in some arcane territory in the forbiddingly voluminous Sanskrit sources or some other neighborhood Aryan texts in order to conjure up a compelling picture of “early religions.” Meanwhile, those with limited access to this area of antiquity had a cause to complain. Andrew Lang, for instance, racked by a chronic case of Sanskrit envy as I imagine him, protested that the true state of the early history of “man” was not to be extrapolated from some rarified priestly documents from India or anywhere else but rather from the untutored habits and customs of the contemporary savage societies. With this argument Lang sought to champion “anthropology” over Müller’s “history of religion” (Lang 1893: 212-242; see also Lang’s own Gifford Lectures [1898]).

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2 To be precise, Müller was one of the four prominent Victorian scholars who, in accordance with the stipulation of the bequest, gave their respective series of lectures at one of the four Scottish universities: Müller at Glasgow, Hutcheson Stirling at Edinburgh, Andrew Lang at St. Andrews, and, a year later, E. B. Tylor at Aberdeen.

3 Müller returned to the same podium three more years, in effect, to elaborate on the theme of natural history of religion stage by stage: *Physical Religion* (1889), *Anthropological Religion* (1890), and *Theosophy: Psychological Religion* (1891).