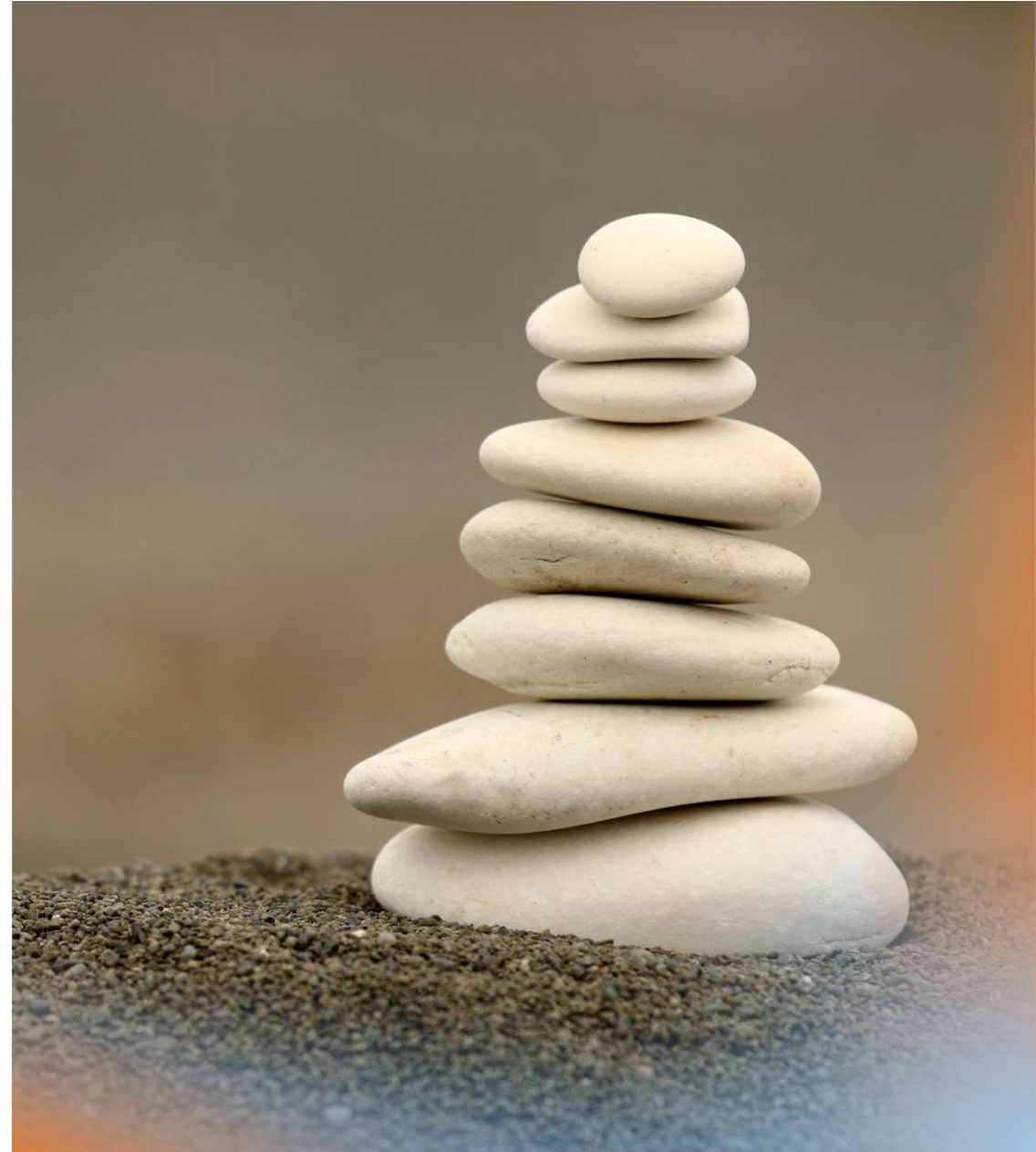


The Book of Nature between natural knowledge of God and God's Revelation



Summary

- I. The book of nature and knowledge of God
- II. The notion of natural theology and its many meanings
- III. Darwinism, evolution, and the crisis of natural theology
- IV. Natural theology between intuition, experience, and argument
- V. The place of natural theology in the Christian faith



An open book is shown from a top-down perspective, with the pages fanned out. The central gutter of the book is where two pages are folded inward to form a heart shape. The text is overlaid on this heart shape. The background is dark and out of focus.

I. The book of nature and knowledge
of God

St John Paul II

- *Fides et ratio*, 19, encouraged us “to recognize as a first stage of divine Revelation the marvellous ‘book of nature’, which, when read, with the proper tools of human reason, can lead to knowledge of the Creator.”





For child and scientist

- Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2500:
- “Even before revealing himself to man in words of truth, God reveals himself to him through the *universal language of creation*, the work of his Word, of his wisdom: the order and harmony of the cosmos—which both the child and the scientist discover [...]”.

Evagrius of Pontos, *Letter to Melania*:

- “Now all these things which are done through letters, are a kind of symbol of the things which in truth are done by those who are far apart from God. For those who are far from God have made a separation between themselves and their Creator by their loathsome works. **But God, out of his love, has provided creation as a mediator: it is like letters. He did this through his power and wisdom, that is, by the Son and the Spirit**, in order that men might come to know and draw closer to his love for them. . .
- “Just as someone who reads letters, by their beauty senses the power and ability of the hand and the finger which wrote them together with the intention of the writer, thus he who looks upon creation with understanding, perceives the hand and the finger of its Creator as well as his intention, that is, his love.”



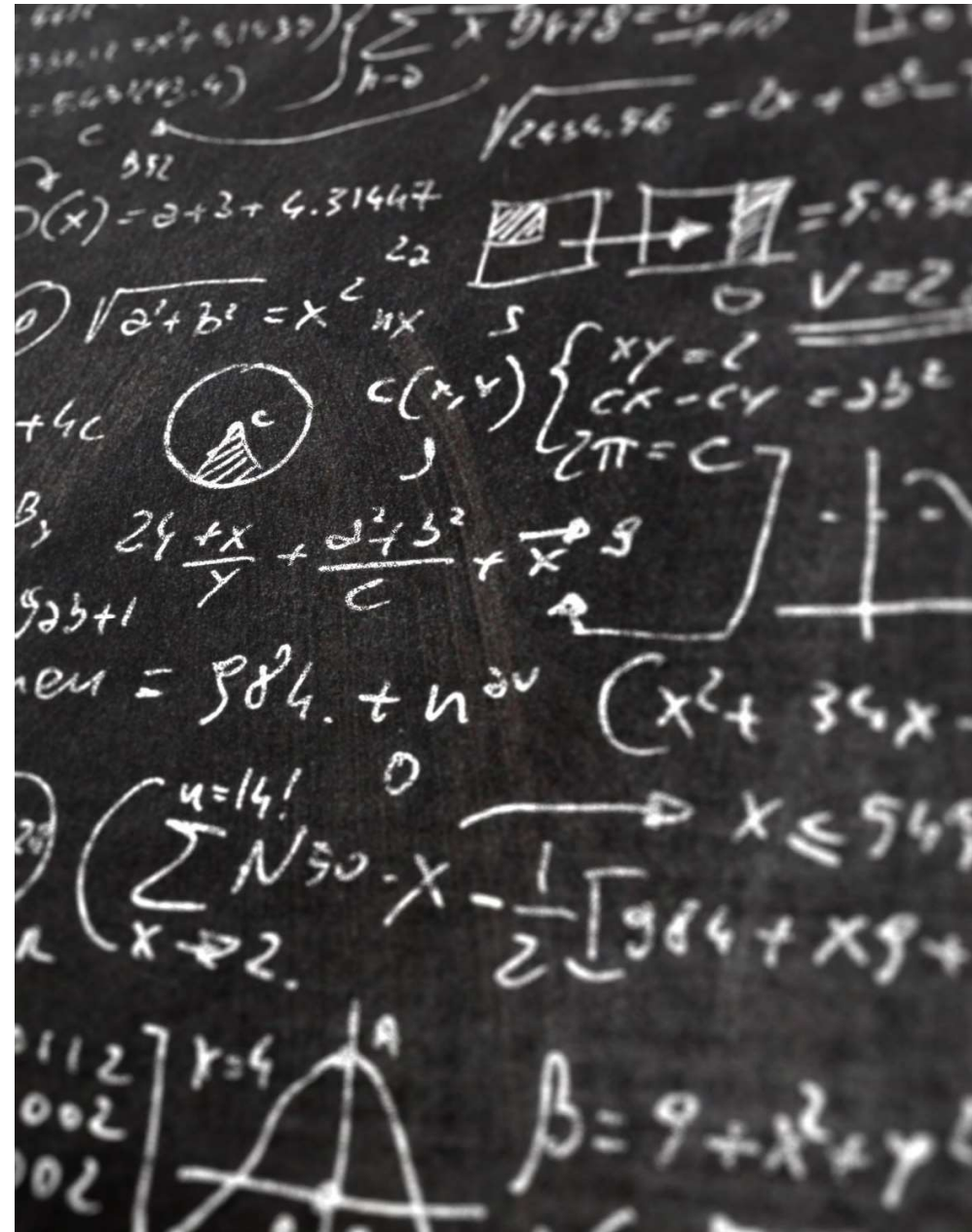
Augustine

- Commentary on Matthew 11:25 (God's hiding things from the wise and the understanding):
- How the invisible things of God have been revealed: through the things that have been made.
- "Others, in order to find God, will read a book. Well, as a matter of fact there is a certain great big book, **the book of created nature** (*magnus liber ipsa species creaturae*). Look carefully at it top and bottom, **observe it, read it**. God did not make letters of ink for you to recognize him in; he set before your eyes all these things he has made. **Why look for a louder voice? Heaven and earth cries out to you, «God made me.»**"



Some questions

- "when read, with the proper tools of human reason..." (John Paul II):
 - What are these tools?
 - How should we read the book of nature?
- Who can read it?
 - Galileo/scientists
- Can we read it without Scriptures?
 - Bonaventure
- What kind of knowledge does it give?
 - Pascal





Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)

- The Book of Nature is **written in a mathematical language**. Its characters are triangles, circles and geometric figures.
- **Only scientists** can read it:
- “Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles and others geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.”

On the other hand...

- Saint Bonaventure (13th century)
- **“Before sin, man had the knowledge of created things and through their images he was led to know God, to praise, to worship and to love him. The purpose for which living beings exist, is to lead us to God. When human beings fell because of sin, they lost such knowledge and so there was no one who could bring all things back to God. Thus this book, that is the world, seemed dead and destroyed.”**
- **“Therefore, there was a need for another book through which the previous book had to be enlightened, in order to acknowledge the true meaning of things. This book is nothing but Sacred Scripture, which contains metaphors, images and teachings about the book of the world. In this way, the book of Scripture restores the whole world, and allows the latter again to lead us to know, to praise and to love God.”** (Collationes in Hexäameron, XIII, 12).





Blaise Pascal and the
'god of the
philosophers'

The year of grace 1654,

*Monday, 23 November, feast of St.
Clement, pope and martyr, and others in
the martyrology. Vigil of St. Chrysogonus,
martyr, and others. From about half past
ten at night until about half past midnight,
FIRE.*

***GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of
Jacob not of the philosophers and of the
learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy.
Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and
your God. ... Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.***

A wide-angle photograph of a coastal dune landscape. A wooden boardwalk, constructed from light-colored planks, curves from the foreground towards the middle ground, leading the viewer's eye into the scene. The dunes are covered in a mix of green grasses and patches of brown, sandy soil. In the background, a line of dark evergreen trees marks the horizon under a heavy, overcast sky with soft, diffused light. The overall mood is serene and natural.

II. The notion of natural theology and its many meanings

Terminological history in a nutshell

- Antiquity: *theologia* as speech about gods
 - **Augustine** (*Civ. Dei*) discusses Terentius **Varro's** (116–27 BC) notion of *tria genera theologiae*: mythical, civil and physical/natural
 - Mythical – poets
 - Civil – national gods, emperor worship
 - Natural – philosophy
- But term associated with pagan religion – rarely used by Christians
- Shift towards modern 'natural theology':
 - Aquinas' demonstrations of God's existence
 - Growing rift between 'theology' and 'philosophy' (13th century -)
 - Modern period: challenges to revealed religion

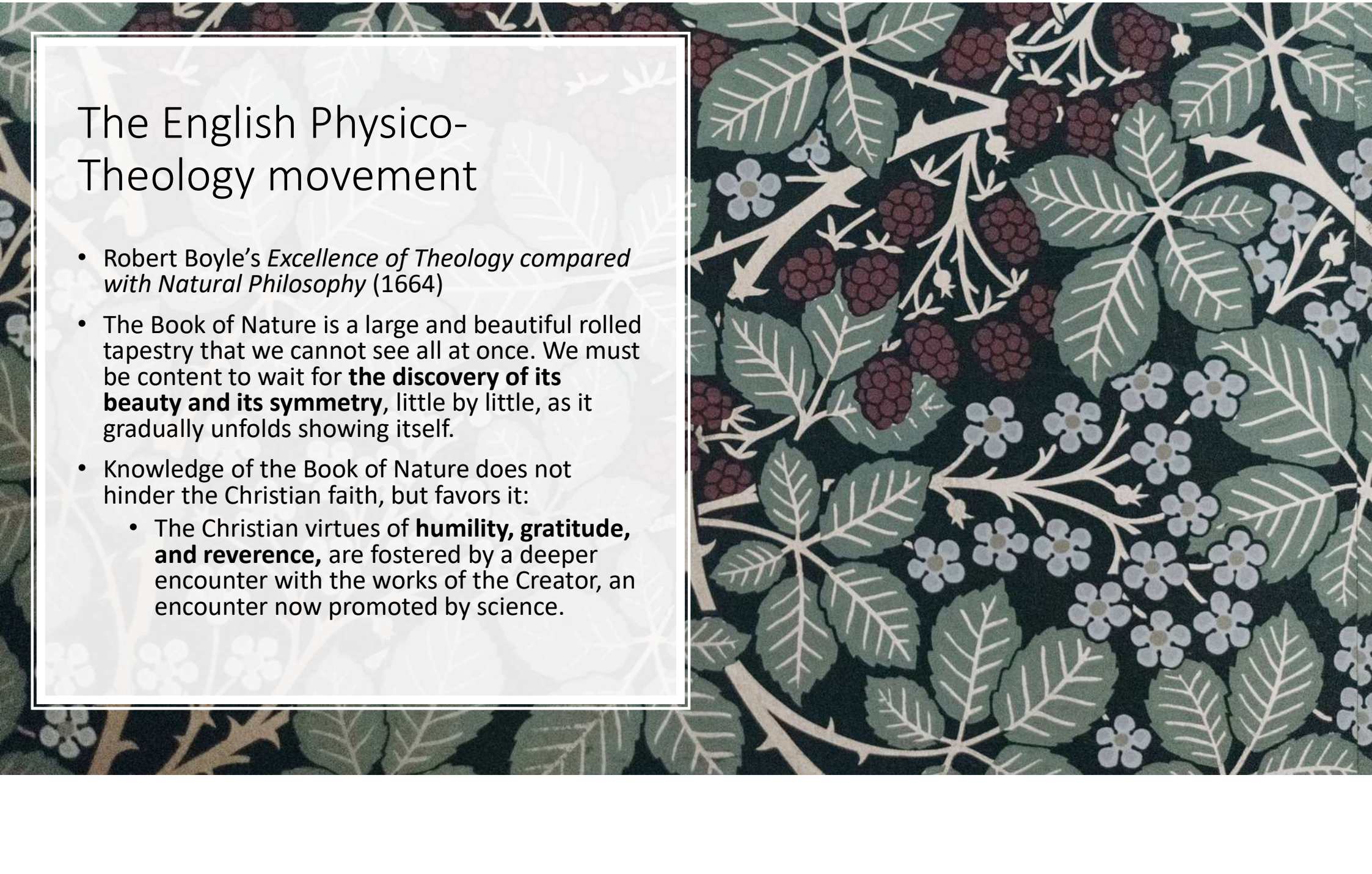
Raymond of Sabunde

- *Liber Creaturarum seu Theologia naturalis* (15th century)
- McGrath: originally envisaged as a 'spirituality of nature'
- Shift towards modern notion of natural theology:
 - The French humanist writer Michel de Montaigne translated this work into French in 1559 as *La théologie naturelle* ('Natural Theology'),
 - pointing out that Sibiuda's approach might prove helpful in countering the rise of atheism and skepticism.



The English Physico-Theology movement

- Robert Boyle's *Excellence of Theology compared with Natural Philosophy* (1664)
- The Book of Nature is a large and beautiful rolled tapestry that we cannot see all at once. We must be content to wait for **the discovery of its beauty and its symmetry**, little by little, as it gradually unfolds showing itself.
- Knowledge of the Book of Nature does not hinder the Christian faith, but favors it:
 - The Christian virtues of **humility, gratitude, and reverence**, are fostered by a deeper encounter with the works of the Creator, an encounter now promoted by science.



- John Ray, *The Wisdom of God* (1691)
- William Derham:
 - *Physico-theology, or a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1723)
 - *Astro-theology, or demonstration of the being and attributes of God, from a Survey of the Heavens* (1731)

THE
Wisdom of God
 Manifested in the
WORKS
 OF THE
CREATION,
 In Two Parts,
 VIZ.

The Heavenly Bodies, Elements, Meteors, Fossils, Vegetables, Animals, (Beasts, Birds, Fishes, and Insects) more particularly in the Body of the Earth, its Figure, Motion, and Consistency, and in the admirable Structure of the Bodies of Man, and other Animals; as also in their Generation, &c. With Answers to some Objections.

By **J O H N R A Y,**
 Fellow of the *Royal Society.*

The Third Edition, very much enlarg'd throughout.


L O N D O N
 Printed for *Sam. Smith,* and *Benj. Walford,* at the *Prince's Arms,* in *St. Paul's Church-yard.* MDCCI.

PHYSICO-THEOLOGY.
 OR, A
DEMONSTRATION
 OF THE
Being and Attributes of GOD,
 FROM HIS
WORKS OF CREATION.
 Being the SUBSTANCE of
Sixteen SERMONS
 Preached in *St. Mary-le-Bow-Church, London;*
 At the Honourable Mr. *BOYLE's* LECTURES,
 in the Years 1711, and 1712.
 With large *Notes,* and many curious *Observations.*

By **W. DERHAM,** Canon of *Windfor,* Rector of *Upminster in Essex,* and F. R. S.

Mala & impia consuetudo est contra Deos disputare, sive animo id fit, sive simulati. Cicer. de Nat. Deor. L. 2. fine.

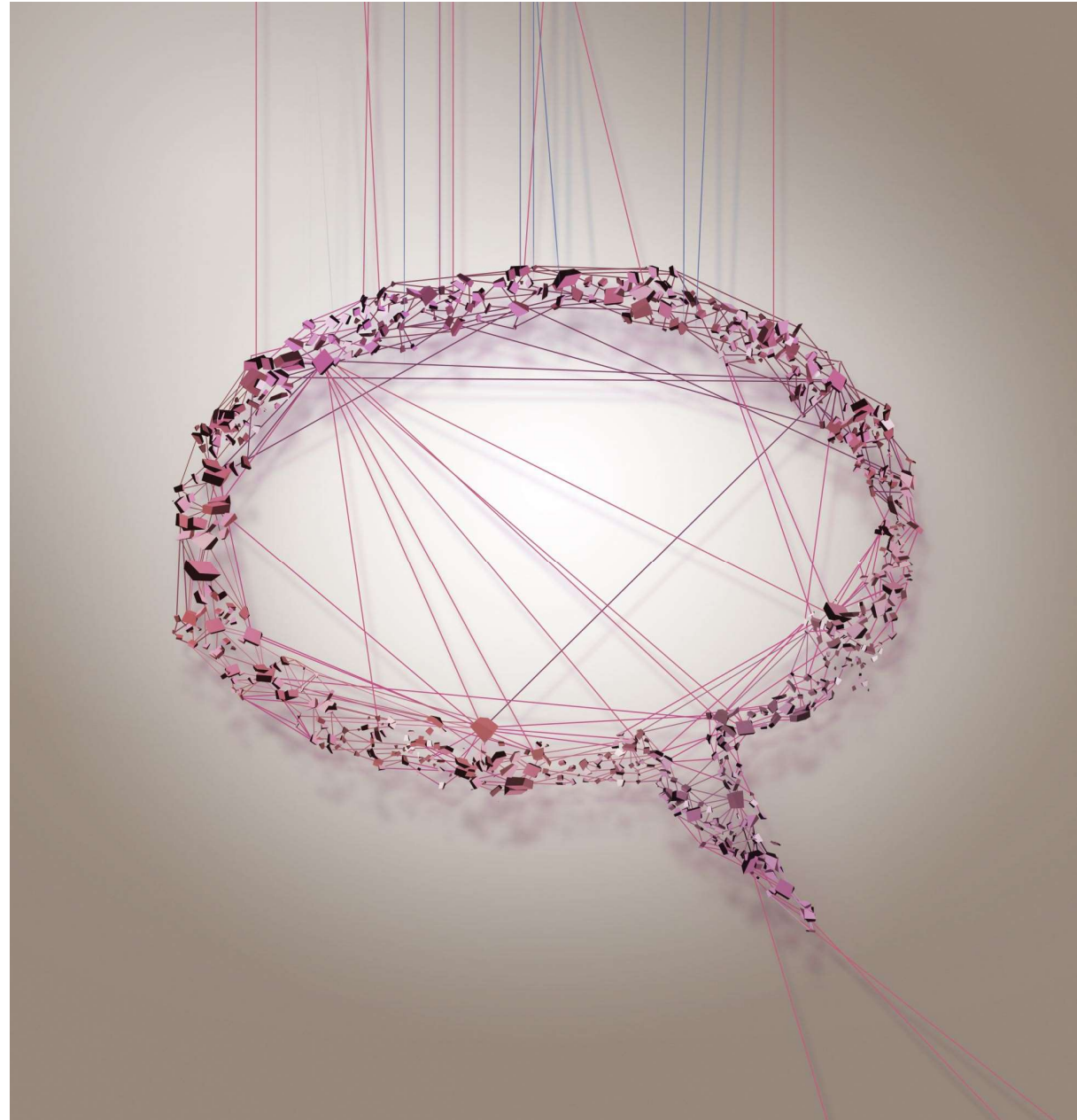
The Sixth Edition.

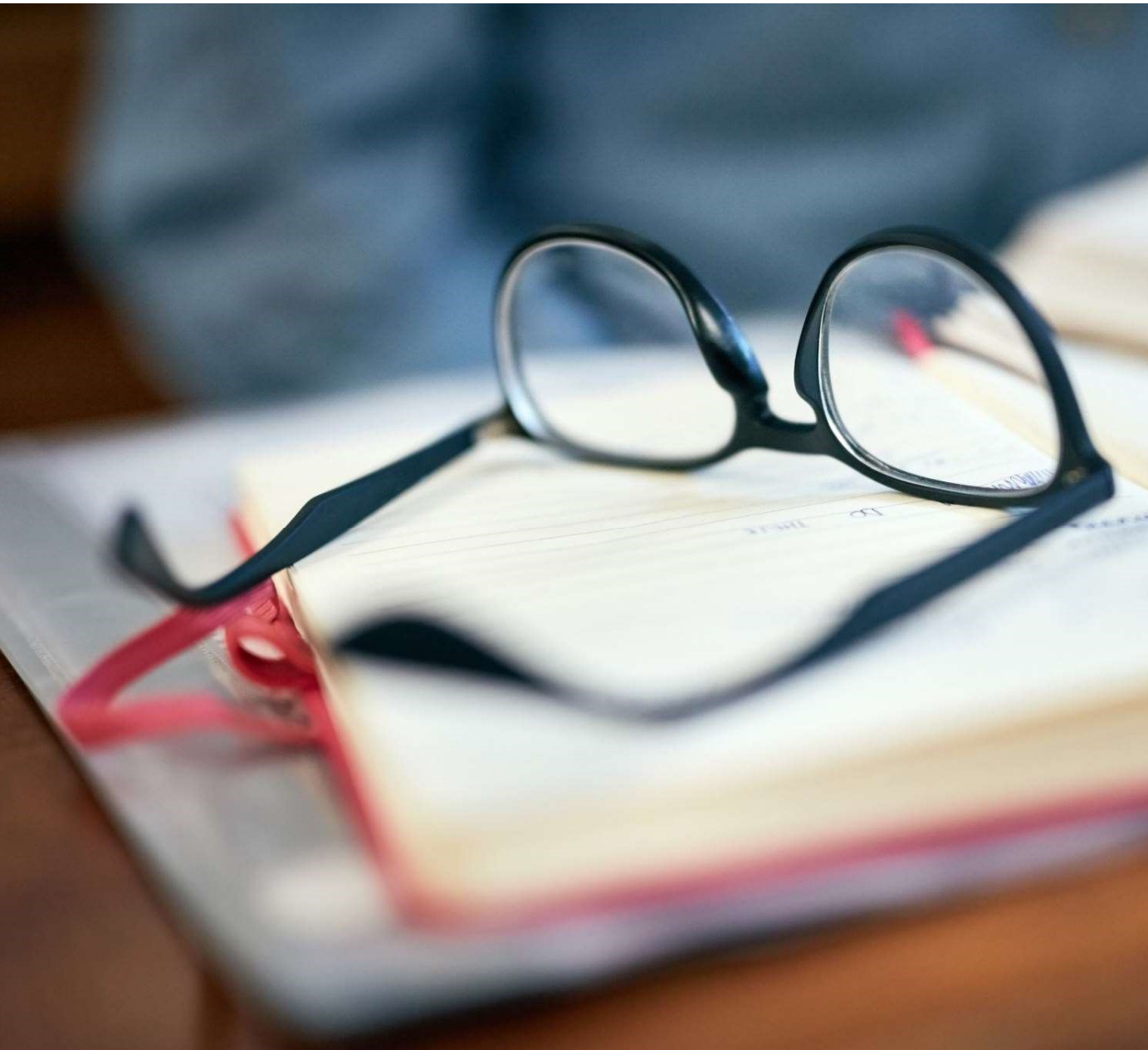


L O N D O N:
 Printed for *W. and J. Innys,* at the *Prince's Arms* the West-End of *St. Paul's.* MDCCLXXIII.

Varieties of 'natural theology'

- 1. Arguments/proofs of God's existence
 - 'Cosmological' (from the world)
 - Aquinas' Five Ways
 - 'Design' arguments
 - 'Ontological' – conceptual necessity (St Anselm)
 - Moral arguments (Newman, CS Lewis), or arguments from man himself
- CCC 31-35
- Some patristic references to the 'book of nature' seem to be of this kind

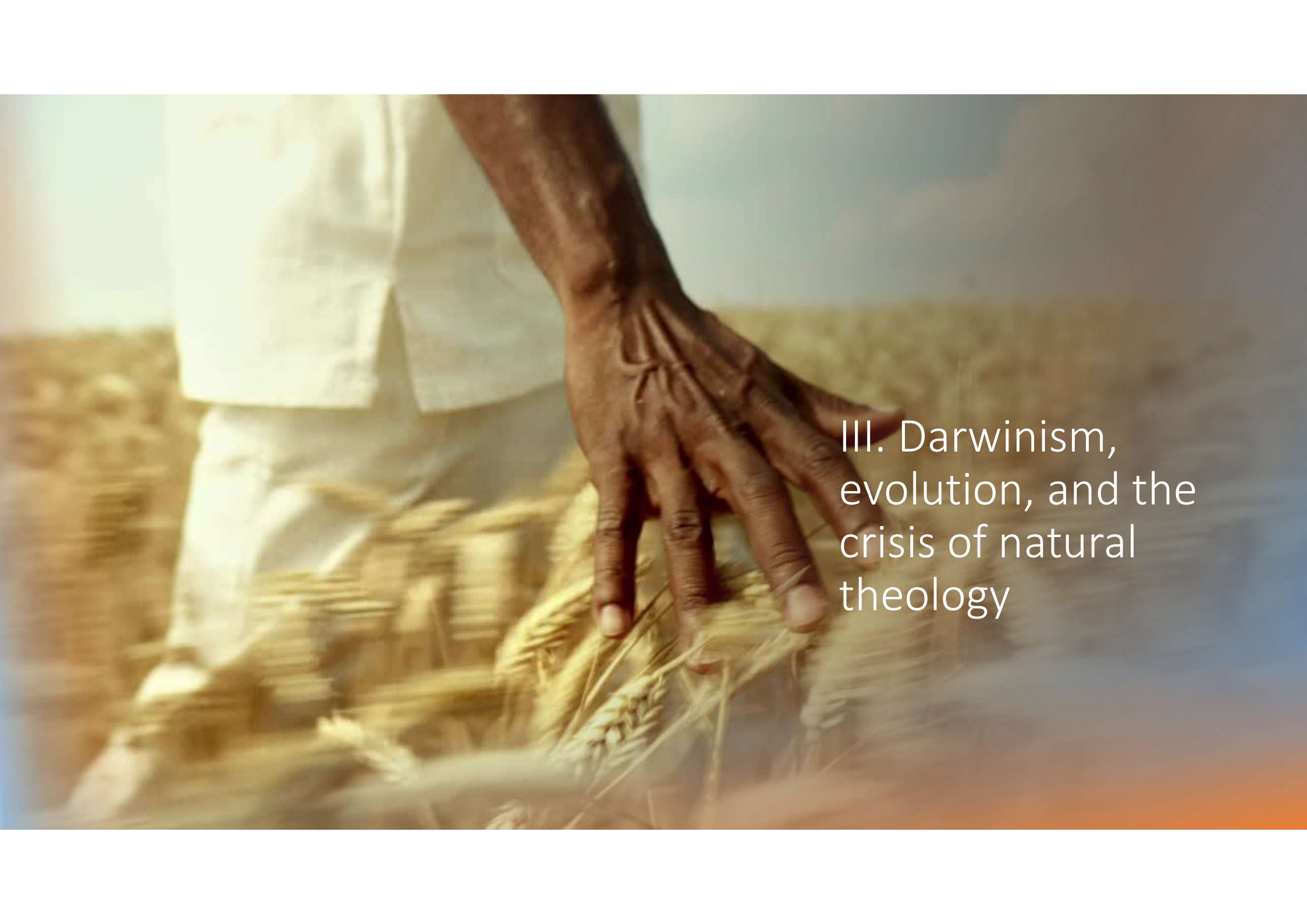




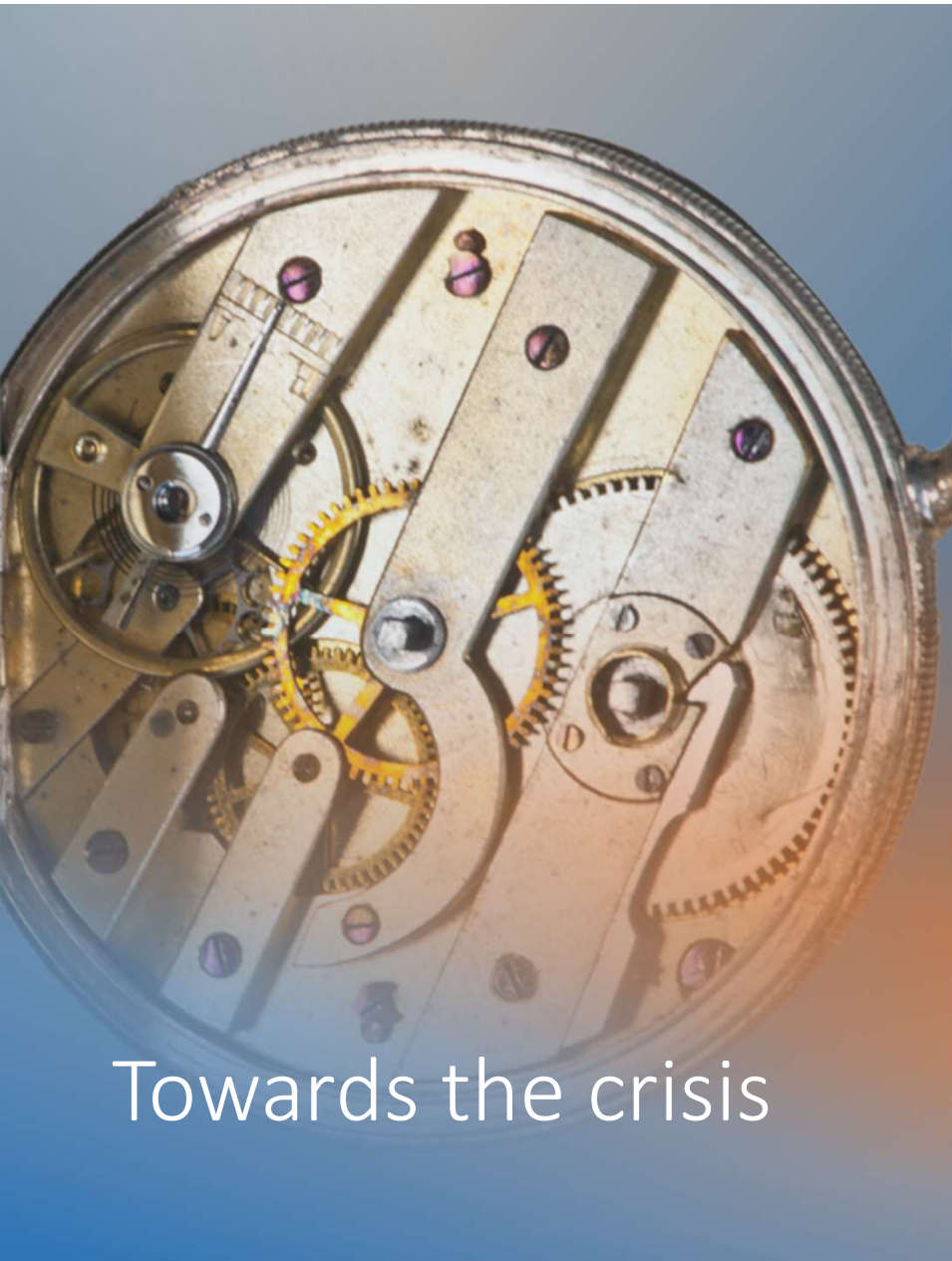
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- 2. Working out what can be known of God from a close study of the 'Book of Nature', which may be supplemented by a reading of the 'Book of Scripture'.
 - Many patristic references to the 'book of nature' are of this type
 - Bonaventure, too: book of nature *can* be read with the help of Scripture



- 3. Natural theology as the way of **seeing or imagining the natural order from within the Christian faith**
- Alister McGrath calls this also *theology of nature*
- Much 'science and religion' literature is of this kind
- Many 'book of nature' references may be characterizes thus



III. Darwinism,
evolution, and the
crisis of natural
theology



Towards the crisis

- Context:
 - Development of natural science
 - Protestant Reformation and the 'wars of religion'
 - Early development of biblical criticism
- The *book of nature* tradition – new apologetic emphasis
- Newton's influential idea of the universe as a mechanism
 - God as the *great watchmaker*
- David Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779)
- Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)

William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802)

- A classic work of popular religious apologetics
- Success (for a time) – managed to sidestep Hume's objections to natural theology
- No reference to arid and difficult metaphysics (like Aquinas)
- Instead, a carefully reasoned theistic explanation of **biological complexities**



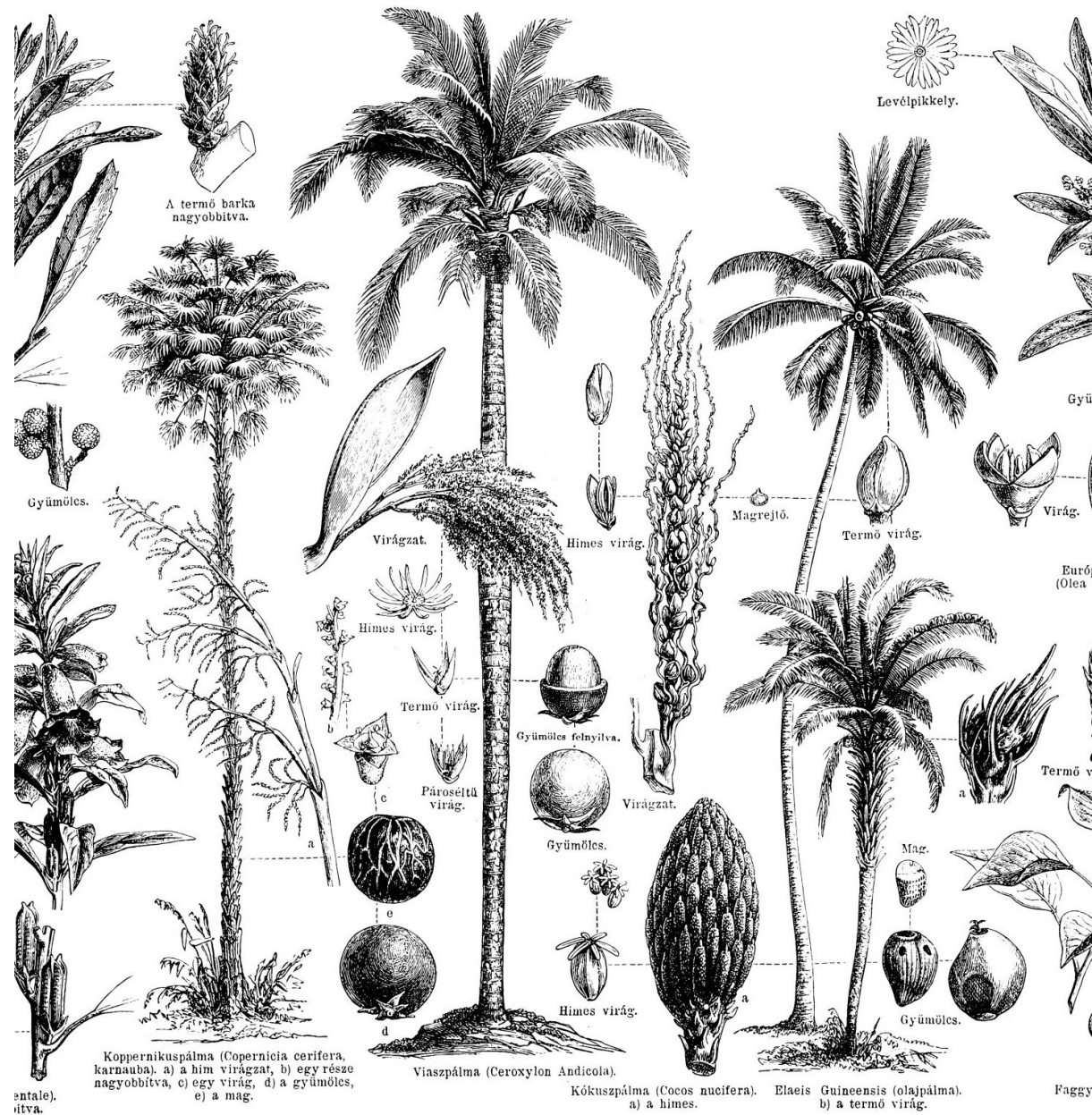
The divine watchmaker

- Paley's thesis: we can *perceive* a **divine 'artificer'**
 - (This develops Newton's idea of God as the watchmaker)
- Industrial revolution – fascination with machines
- Nature as analogous to machines or instruments that had been 'contrived' = **designed** and constructed in order to achieve **a specific goal**
- Some theologians objected, including John Henry Newman...



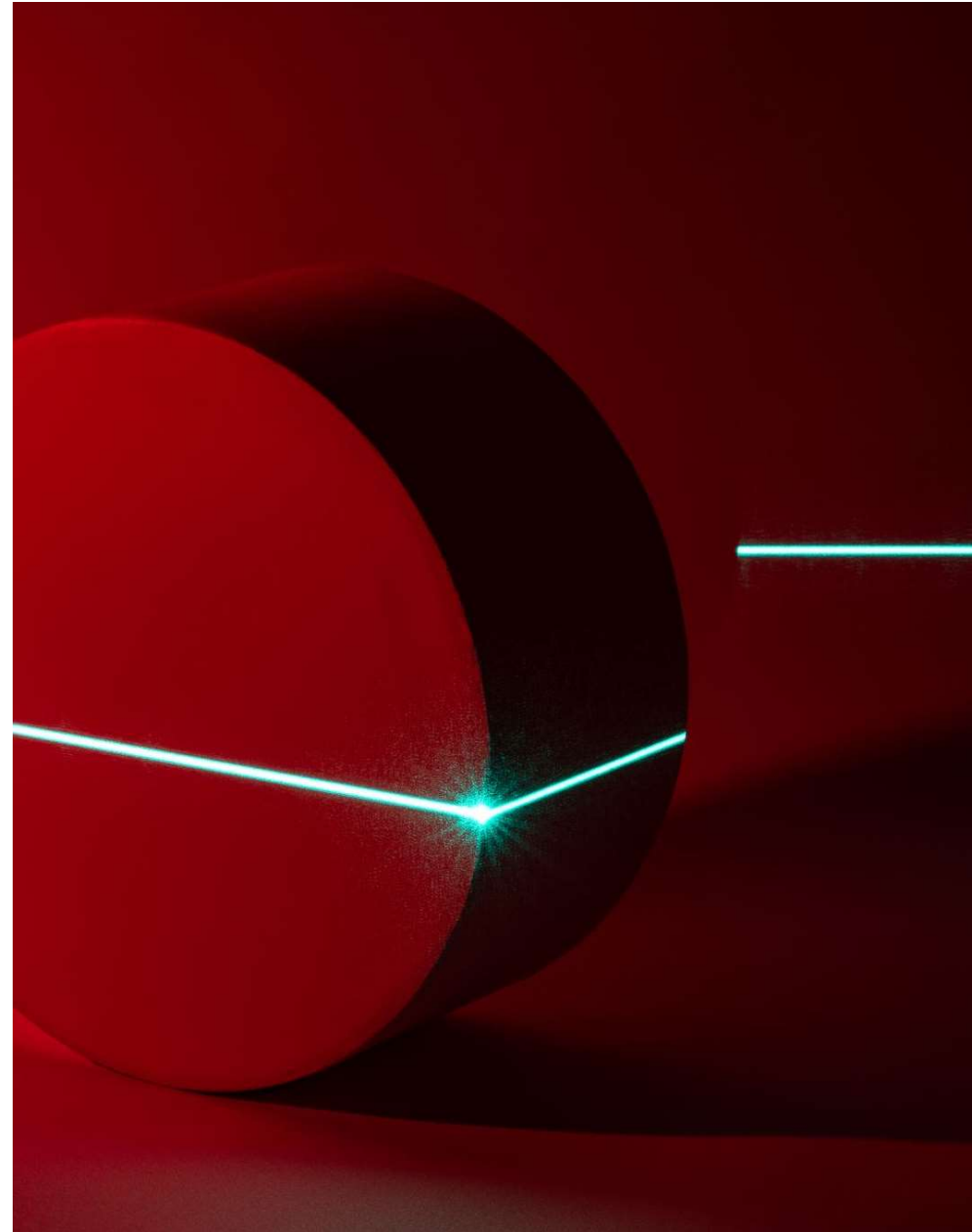
Bring in Charles Darwin

- *The Origin of Species* (1859)
- *Descent of Man* (1871)
- Long process of evolution
- 'Natural selection' – survival of the fittest – no intrinsic purpose
- Many theologians argued that this is compatible with God's creation and providence
- But **popular religious consciousness** suffered a shock: the perception of design seemed only *apparent*, hence *an illusion*



A lingering debate

- Richard Dawkins' *Selfish Gene* (1976) and *Blind Watchmaker* (1986)
- The modern '**intelligent design**' (ID) approach hark back to William Paley's approach
 - Notions like 'irreducible complexity'
- Some new scientific approaches that have begun to reframe the discussion
 - Cosmic 'fine-tuning' and the 'anthropic principle'
 - Re-emergence of *teleology* in biology

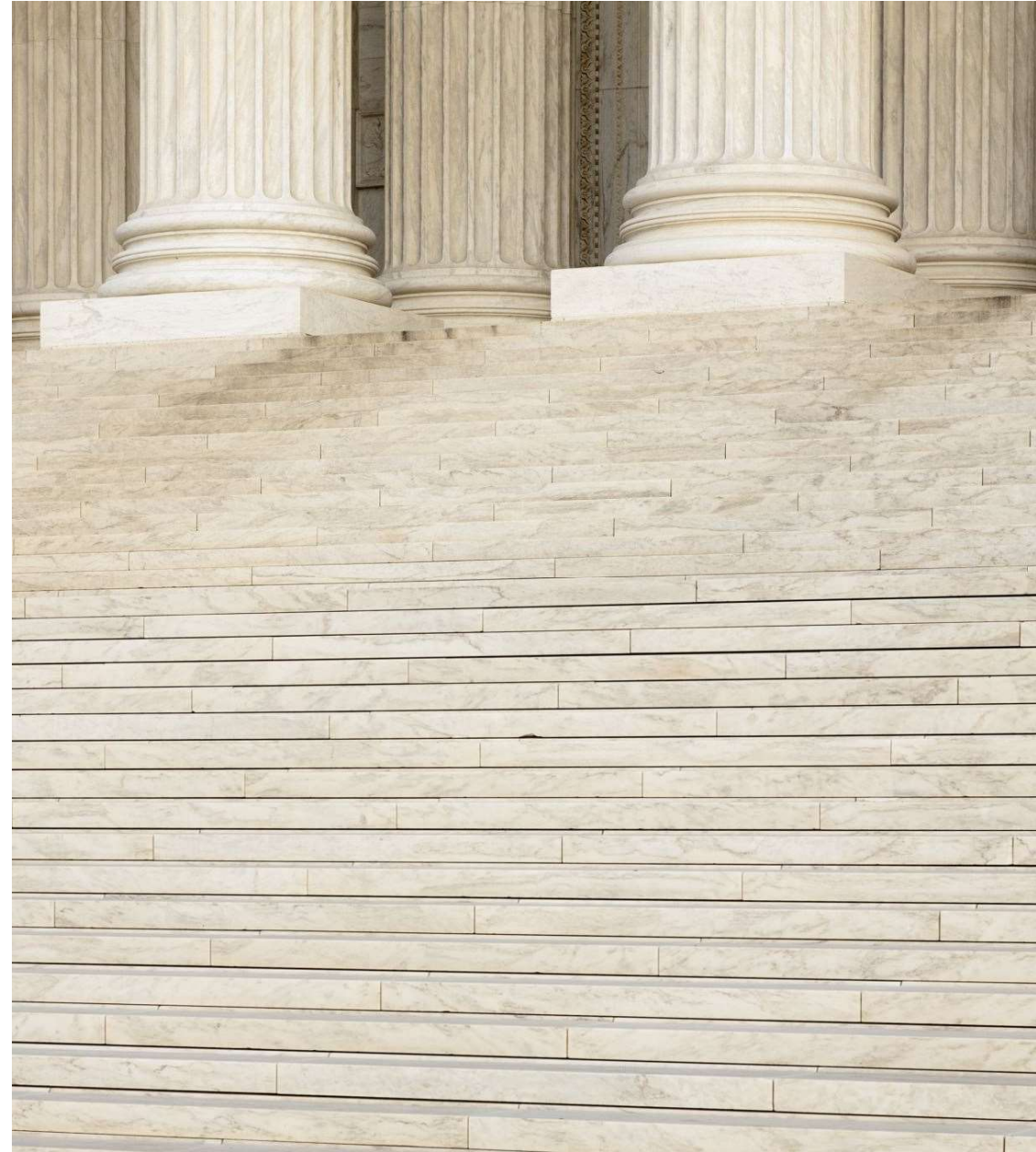


IV. Natural
theology between
intuition,
experience, and
argument



Cognitio communis et confusa

- Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* III.38:
- *Est enim quaedam communis et confusa Dei cognitio, quae quasi omnibus hominibus adest –*
- **there is a common and confused knowledge of God which is found in practically all men; this is due either to the fact that it is self-evident that God exists (...) or, what seems indeed to be true, that man can *immediately* reach some sort of knowledge of God by natural reason.**
- For, **when men see that things in nature run according to a *definite order***, and that ordering does not occur without an orderer, **they *perceive*** in most cases that there is **some orderer** of the things that we see.



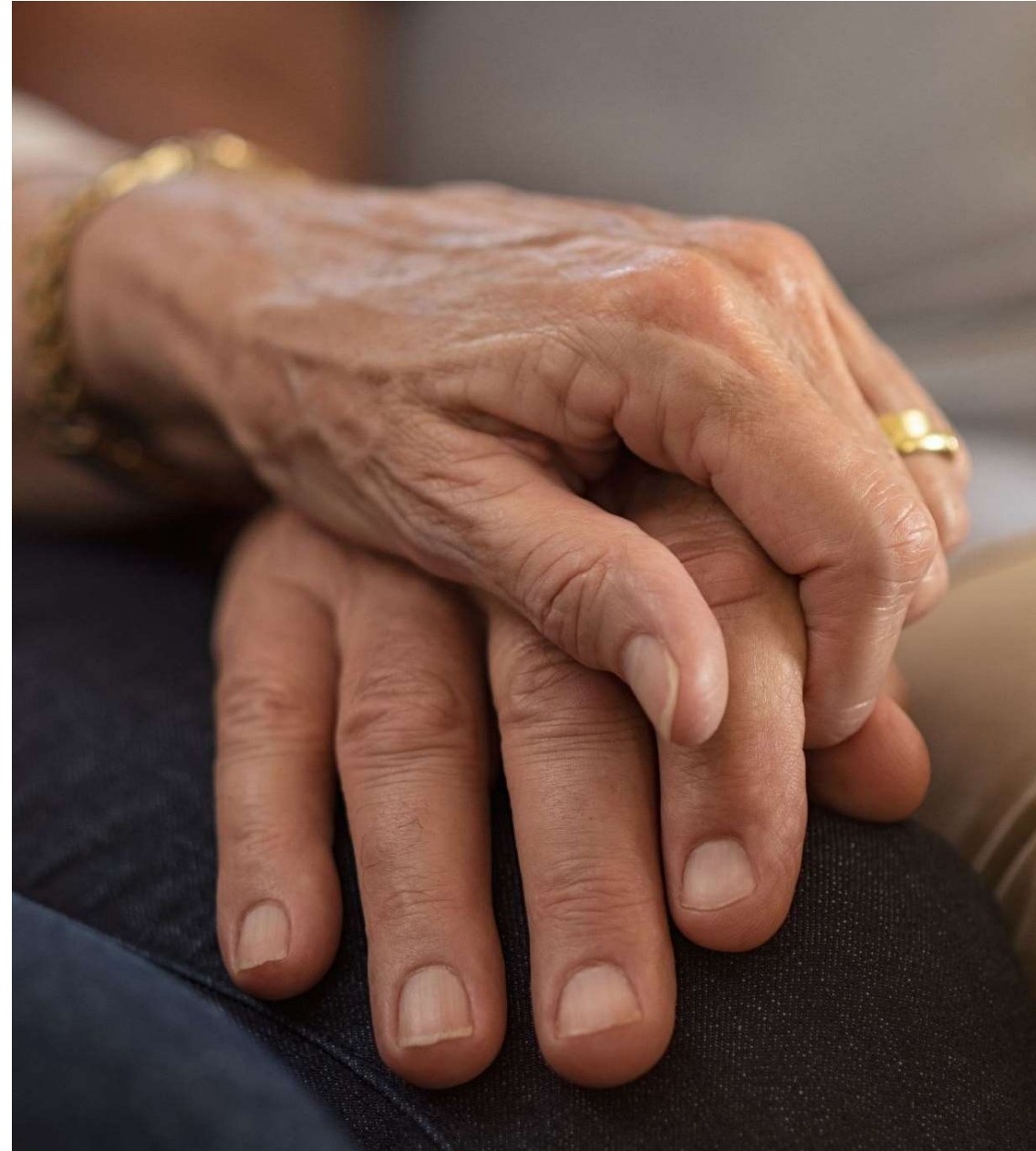
What kind of knowledge is this?

- "It is a kind of **spontaneous** “natural inference”. The movement of thought involved is hardly noticed. It is **not analyzed** into its elementary steps. It seems “a simple vision of a total situation”. It is **experienced as a perception.**"
- "Thomas repeatedly speaks of it as a “**perception**”."
- (Brock 2002)



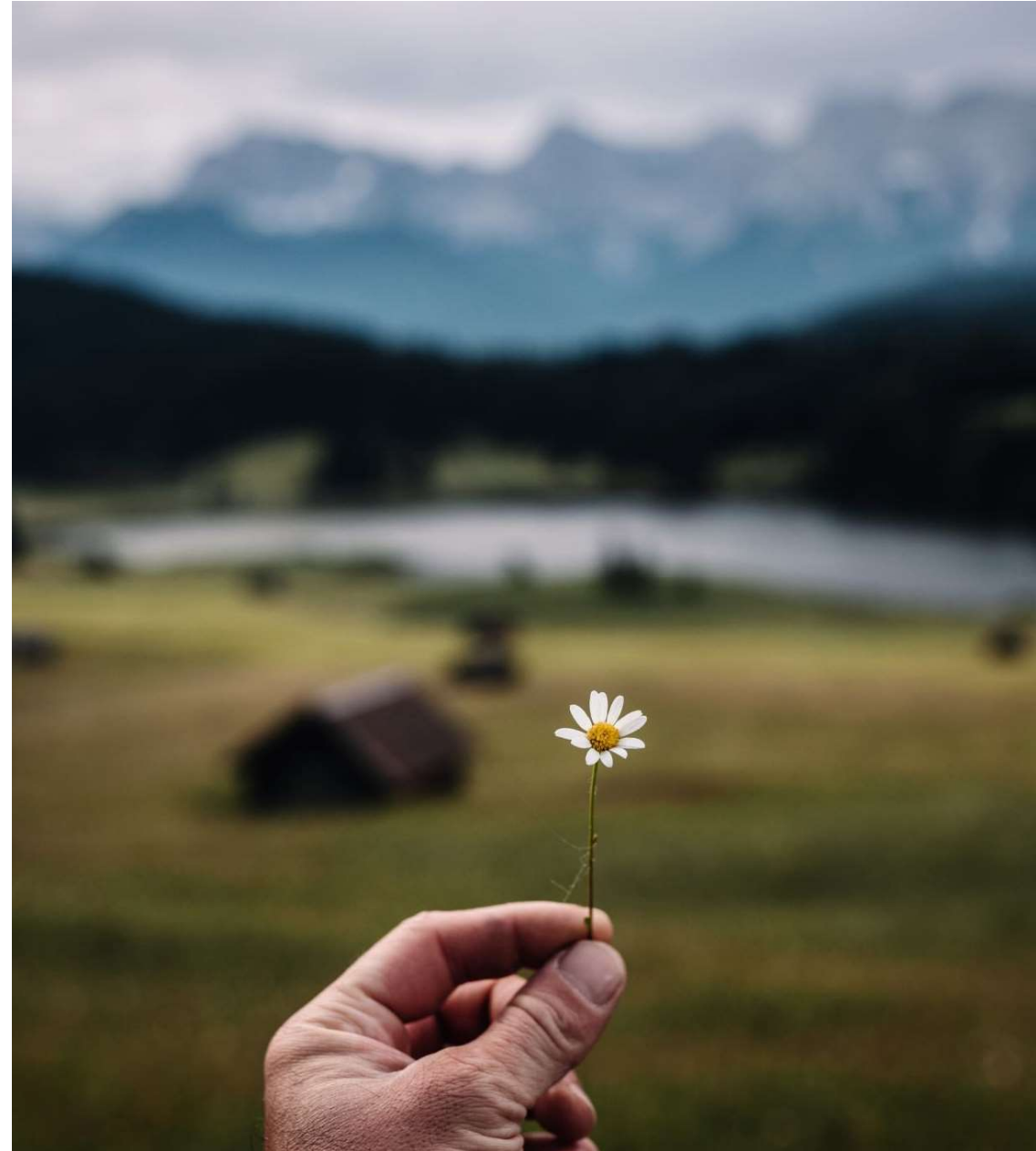
Religious experience and knowledge of God

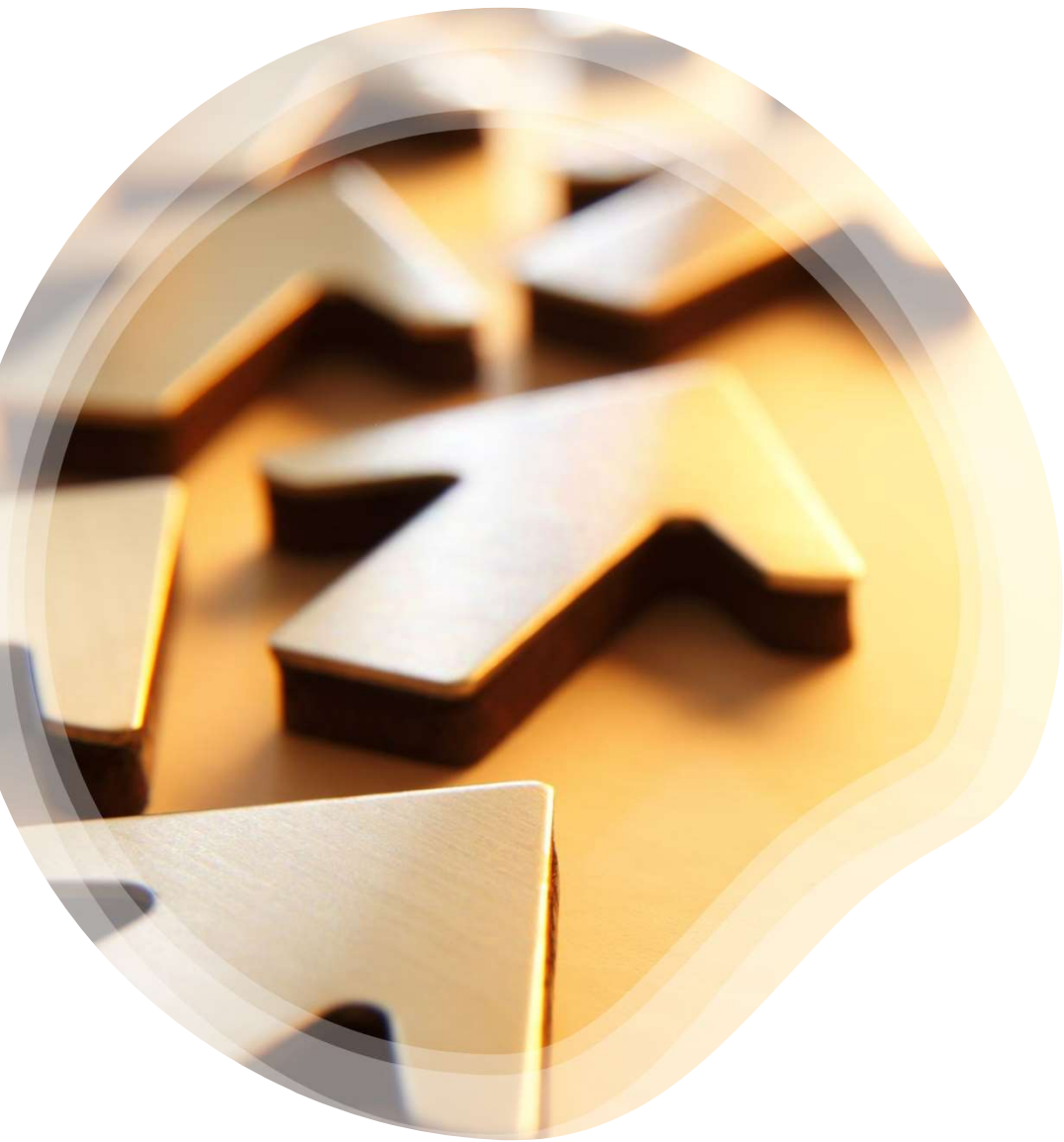
- (see Griffioen article, for example)
- **William Alston**, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (1993)
- **Alvin Plantinga**, *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000)
 - 'Reformed epistemology' and Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*
 - 'properly basic beliefs' (immediate, non-inferential) may be justified
- **Richard Swinburne**, *The Existence of God* (2e, 2004)
 - 'argument from religious experience' (very common – at least tentative evidence for God's existence)



Nature as a locus of experiencing God

- Christian book of nature tradition – seeing *signs of God* in nature
- C. Stephen Evans:
 - "Some people might well infer God's reality from [certain properties the flower has], by way of [...] cosmological or teleological arguments for God's existence. [...] However, [...] spiritually seasoned observers of the world might experience God through the flower without any kind of inference. Such persons, we might say, are able to see the world as God's handiwork; they are able to 'read' what some theologians have called the 'book of nature,' a manifestation or revelation from God distinct from those particular events and experiences that are inscribed in inspired, revealed writings [...]."





- From Islamic Sufi tradition: Seyyed Hossein Nasr
 - "[I]n the Quran both the phenomena of nature and the verses of the Quran are called āyāt, or symbols and signs, each conveying a meaning beyond itself. Every āyah, besides its outward meaning, has **a symbolic and inward significance**. Every cosmic phenomenon is both a fact and a symbol of a noumenon [...] The universe is constituted of theophanies; the cosmos is a set of **symbols to be contemplated and a means to reach the Symbolized, a book to be read and understood** in both its outward and inward meanings."

The limits of experience and perception

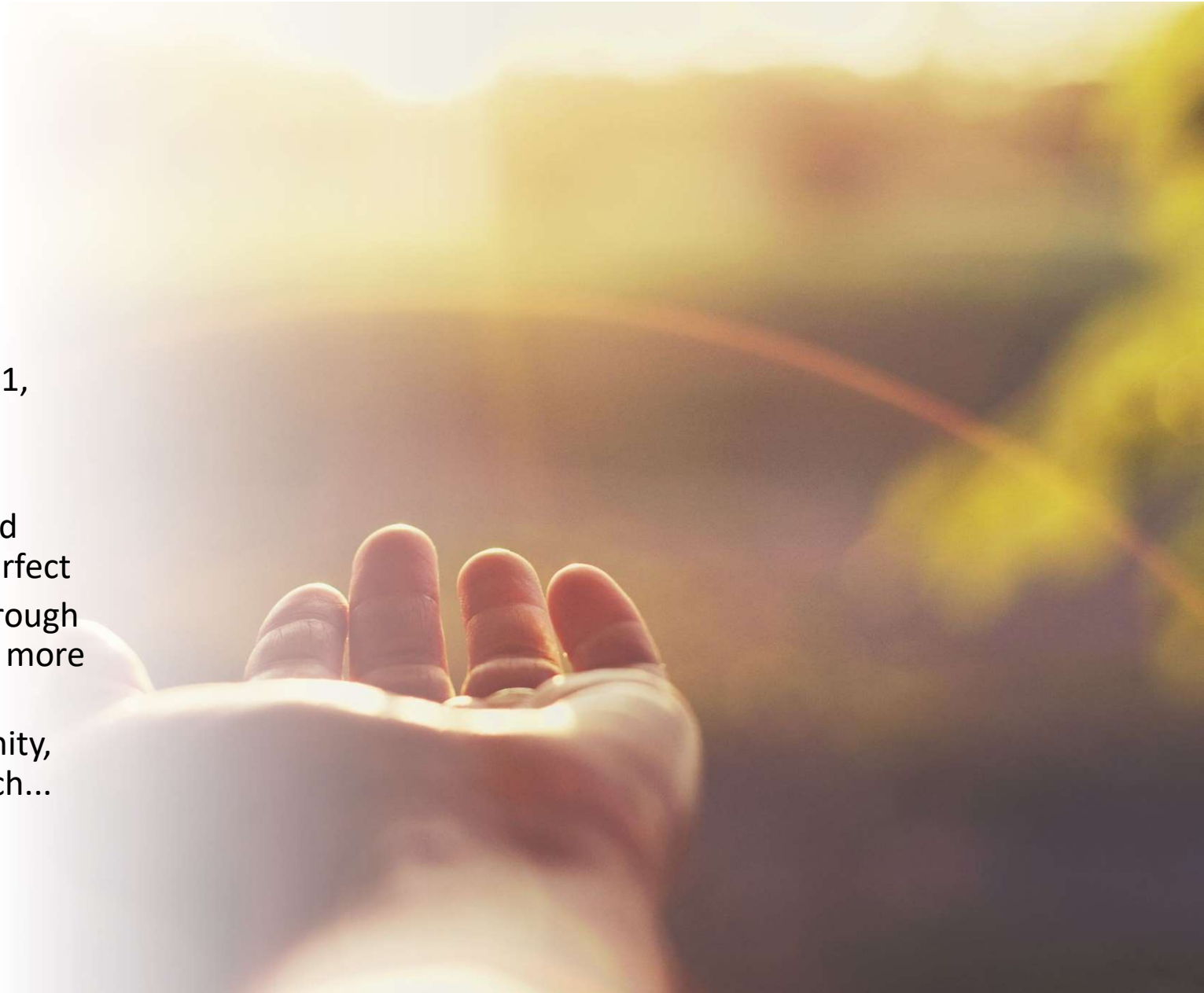
- Aquinas' notion of *cognition communis et confusa*
- **"But who or what kind of being, or whether there is but one orderer of nature, is not yet grasped immediately in this general consideration..."**
- → Only proper demonstrations can provide *scientia*, certain knowledge through causes



V. The place
of natural
theology in
the Christian
faith



- Biblical support (Psalm 19:1, Romans 1:20 etc.)
- Necessity for revelation
 - Common and confused knowledge: very imperfect
 - Certain knowledge through philosophy: still much more to learn!
 - Mysteries of faith, Trinity, Incarnation, the Church...





Knowledge and relationship as personal

- A personal journey – role of philosophy varies
- Perception of signs – always personal, signs that speak *to me*
- Faith – always requires *grace* – leading to a relationship
- Dialogue between different sources of knowledge → paradigm building (narratives, imagination, convictions)

Book of nature, again

- An 'enigmatic' book
 - Information and intelligibility
 - But also questions and paradoxes
- Analogy with Scripture (especially Old Testament)
 - Promise and fulfilment



Suggested readings

- A. Freddoso, The Necessity for Revelation - A Primer on Summa Contra Gentiles I, 1-9, <https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/papers/revelat.htm>
- A. Griffioen, "Signs for a People Who Reason": Religious Experience and Natural Theology, European Journal for Philosophy of Religion 9(2) (2017), 139-163. <https://kops.uni-konstanz.de/entities/publication/1cc4568b-04f5-451e-9556-23075132d44a>
- A. McGrath, "Natural Theology", St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology (2022), Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/NaturalTheology>
- A. McGrath, Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2011)
- A. McGrath, The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008)
- M. Wahlberg, Reshaping Natural Theology: Seeing Nature as Creation (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)