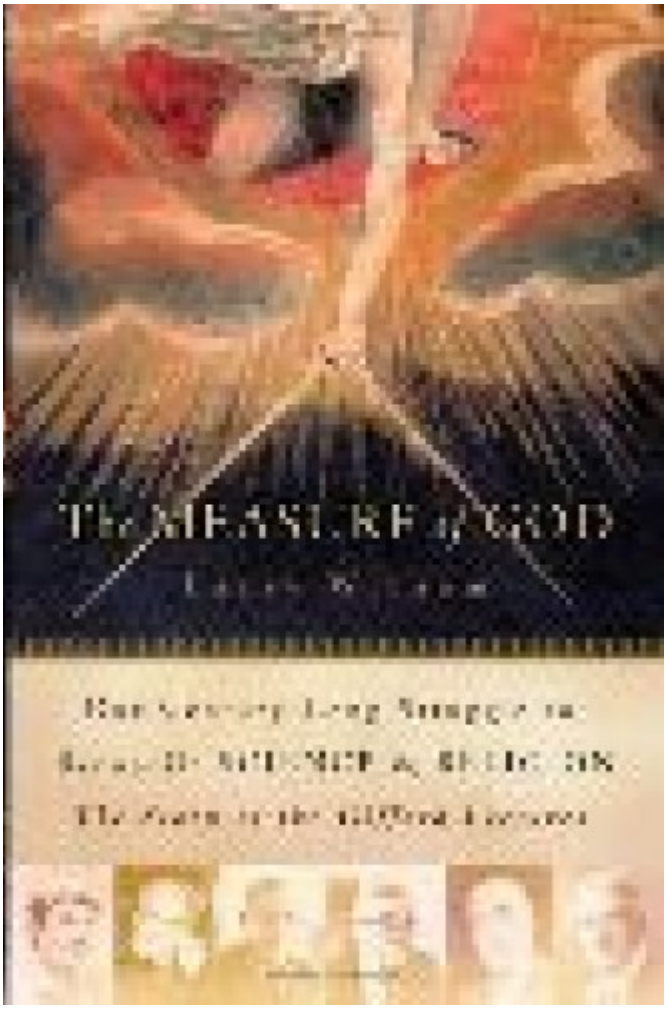
A place for God?

By Stanley Hauerwas in the February 21, 2006 issue

In Review



The Measure of God: Our Century-Long Struggle to Reconcile Science and Religion: The Story of the Gifford Lectures

Larry Witham
HarperSanFrancisco

Had I been able to read Larry Witham's book before I delivered the Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews, I would have been able to make my argument more compelling by locating the story I told in relation to Witham's account of addressing the challenges of science. Witham has managed the impossible: to tell a coherent story about the diverse and often eccentric Gifford Lectures from their beginning in 1888 to the present. Telling this story involves not only reading the lectures, but also knowing the social, political and intellectual background of the various lecturers.

Witham thinks the Gifford Lectures provide a prism in which to view the conflict between science and religion in modernity. Lord Gifford's bequest to the Scottish universities was given in the confidence that a Christianity interpreted as the expression of Spinoza's metaphysics was compatible with science. Yet Gifford's optimism was soon challenged by many of the lecturers. As a result, two main strategies were developed that remain with us today. Some lecturers argued that science and religious convictions could not come into conflict because they represent knowledges of different realities. Others tried to show that science could be used to make the knowledge of God more secure. Witham suggests that both alternatives fail to do justice to the complex relation between science and religion over the past century.

Witham tells his story in four acts. In Act One, the major players are philosophers who represent in various ways the alternatives generated by German idealism as a response to Hume's skepticism and as an effort to avoid the reductive materialism that some feared was implied by Newton. Act Two, which turns out to be the longest act, shows the development of the sciences of anthropology, psychology, physics, sociology and history, each of which in its own way seemed to force a reconsideration of theological claims. Act Three represents the rebellion against science by the rediscovery of subjectivity. Act Four is constituted by those who reclaim natural theology as a response to nihilism.

Witham is well aware that these "acts" are not chronologically exact, and he quite intelligently discusses later Gifford Lectures as exemplifications and further developments of earlier lectures.

Hume and Kant were obviously not Gifford lecturers, but Witham quite rightly makes Hume and Kant the decisive figures for understanding the Hegelian idealism of the early lecturers. Yet the early history of the Giffords was dominated not by

philosophers but by anthropologists such as Edward Tylor and James Frazer. Witham's account of the anthropologists is lively, but also one of the least interesting chapters because these scholars' work is so dated.

It is with William James that the story Witham tells begins to have purchase on our current challenges. Rather than trying like the anthropologists to assess the significance of religion by unearthing the origins of religion, James sought to understand religion in terms of its fruit. That he did so is the reason that James represents one of the most important responses to Darwin. James knew that the most challenging implication of Darwin's work is not its account of human origins but its claim that human existence and possible nonexistence is a matter of chance. For James, that we exist means there is (for at least as long as we exist) purpose in the universe that often finds expression in religious experience. The physicist Charles Raven, a Gifford lecturer in the 1950s, wonderfully expressed James's view when he observed that the more he examines the universe "the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense must have known we were coming."

The fact that the human being may have a place in the universe does not mean that God does. Einstein never gave the Giffords, but his contention that God does not play dice with the universe set the stage for lecturers such as Ernest Rutherford and Nils Bohr, who considered whether a physical understanding of the world left any room for the activity of God. The title of Witham's book nicely suggests that the Gifford lecturers who sought to find a place for God in a world understood by physics assumed that the task was to "measure God."

Reinhold Niebuhr (whom Witham misdescribes as neo-orthodox), like the good Protestant liberal he knew himself to be, accepted that God had been measured by James. Yet Niebuhr was also a great preacher, able to use the burgeoning modes of social science to show how theology could provide a gripping account of the human condition. While aware that Niebuhr would not be recognized as a sociologist by most sociologists today, Witham, in a quite illuminating manner, positions Niebuhr in the tradition of Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, who sought to map the progress of whole societies. Niebuhr's account of sin and his understanding of theology as cultural commentary provided a compelling "sociology" for a theology done in a new idiom.

The third act, which Witham unfortunately describes as the "revolt against reason," is dominated by Karl Barth, who used his Gifford Lectures to exposit the Scots

Confession and remind his audience that it is God who measures us.

The main characters in the last act of Witham's play are physicists and scientists turned philosophers and theologians, such as Ian Barbour and John Polkinghorne. These lecturers explored the limits of science in the hope of finding a way to explain how God might be immanent in the world. Witham notes that "openings for God were found in science's need for a moral compass, the human subjectivity of scientific discovery, and the universality of religious experience." In short, though Witham does not explicitly make this association, these later lecturers continued to work in the path James had trod.

It is, therefore, not surprising that James reappears toward the end of the story as a representative of the complex interaction of Scotland and America that the Gifford Lectures exemplify. Thomas Reid, the Scottish philosopher of common sense, turns out to be the crucial character for understanding this aspect of the four-act play. Reid's influence on the American founders, Witham suggests, may have been returned to Scotland by way of Reid's influence on C. S. Pierce and the latter's influence on James. Nicholas Wolterstorff's use of Reid to reassert the metaphysical realism necessary to sustain natural theology is a case of giving back to Scotland what Scotland had first given to America. In quite different ways, Witham thinks Alisdair MacIntyre, Ralph McInerny and Alvin Plantinga represent Reid's alternative to Hume.

It's apparent from Witham's account that no one who has given the Giffords has been able to show, as Lord Gifford desired, that natural theology could be done in a manner to imitate the natural sciences. MacIntyre's respectful critique of Lord Gifford's understanding of the task of natural theology exposed the philosophical mistakes behind Gifford's ambitions.

I should like to think that my lectures (published as *With the Grain of the Universe*) helped show that if anyone succeeded in fulfilling Lord Gifford's ambition to develop a natural theology in which knowledge of God would be comparable to the knowledges gained through the sciences, the god so justified would not be one worthy of worship. Such a god could not help but be part of the metaphysical furniture of the universe rather than the creator of heaven and earth.

If I'd have had the benefit of reading Witham's book in advance of my lectures, I think I could have made clearer why James was such an essential part of my

argument. Though I was critical of James's and Niebuhr's understanding of Christianity—an account that Barth saw could not avoid turning Christian convictions into anthropology—I hoped it would be obvious that I regard James's *Will to Believe* to be crucial for helping us understand how Christian theology can make claims about the way things are. Accordingly, I tried to give an account of how Barth's theological project could be read as an attempt to develop the habits of speech necessary to engage the moral and scientific challenges before us as Christians.

Admittedly, this way of reading Barth might have surprised Barth, as well as many who regard themselves as Barthians. But if my reading of James's pragmatism is correct—a reading I confess is shaped by Wittgenstein—then I think it not unreasonable to read Barth's project as the display of the significance of "in the beginning was the deed." Accordingly, rather than a retreat from the challenge science may present to theology, Barth's work can be seen as the necessary condition for the possibility of such an engagement.

For example, Barth makes clear that the attempt to make theological claims intelligible by trying to show that science may not be able to "explain" everything through reductive schemes of causation is theologically a dead end. As David Burrell (who certainly should be asked to give the Gifford Lectures) has argued, any talk of God "intervening" in nature is misleading and inappropriate if one remembers that divine action comes under the rubric of creating.

Nor can the intelligibility of faith in God depend on accounts of the irreducibility of "consciousness." While the issue of consciousness is of great philosophical interest, the high humanism at stake in such discussions is often more of a problem for theology than the denial that consciousness is necessary to sustain human uniqueness.

The loss of theological intelligibility since the beginning of the Giffords has more to do with social and political changes than with the development of science. In that respect, I think it would have been quite instructive if Witham had been able to display the politics of the knowledges represented by the various Gifford lecturers. The challenge of the sciences to Christian convictions may involve a direct challenge to one or another Christian conviction, but I suspect that the more determinative challenges the sciences present are more subtle. They come from the ways science is used to justify the social and political arrangements that have reduced Christianity to something we do with our privacy.

In *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*: *Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle observe:

> In the religiously plural society of the United States sectarian faith is optional for citizens, as everyone knows. Americans have rarely bled, sacrificed or died for Christianity or any other sectarian faith. Americans have often bled, sacrificed and died for their country. This fact is an important clue to its religious power. Though denominations are permitted to exist in the United States, they are not permitted to kill, for their beliefs are not officially true. What is really true in any society is what is worth killing for, and what citizens may be compelled to sacrifice their lives for.

By calling attention to the Scot-American connection the Gifford Lectures represent, Witham reminds us that the lectures also reproduce a particular politics. However, if Marvin and Ingle are right about what counts for truth, future Gifford lecturers will need to help us better understand what a politics of truth might entail. No doubt science has a role in such a politics, but much more important is whether the moral and political resources are in place to sustain places where truth matters. I should like to think the church is such a resource.