

**Rodney Holder. *Ramified Natural Theology in Science and Religion: Moving Forward from Natural Theology*.
Routledge Science and Religion Series. Routledge, 2021.
xii+234 pp. £38.99 (pbk).**

Max Baker-Hytch
University of Oxford

Ramified Natural Theology in Science and Religion is a tour de force in the use of probabilistic methods to present a cumulative evidential case not just for generic monotheism but specifically for the central claims of Christianity. As the terms are typically used by contemporary philosophers of religion, *bare* natural theology and *ramified* natural theology differ in that the former seeks to use religiously-neutral methods to try to establish claims merely about a generic monotheistic God whereas the latter aspires to use the same sorts of methods to go further and establish the distinctive claims of a specific religious tradition. Rodney Holder is not the first person to have attempted a project of this latter kind, but the breadth of scholarly literature that Holder wields in building his case is truly impressive, spanning contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, twentieth-century systematic theology, cosmology, and the study of the historical Jesus. The motivation for Holder's project is straightforward and, to this reviewer's mind, compelling: "[I]t is not enough to accept what is claimed as revelation without further ado; one needs to provide reasons for acceptance... Thus the division between knowledge of God from nature and knowledge of God from revelation is an artificial one, since what is claimed to be revealed also needs evaluation using similar modes of rational argument" (1).

Chapters 1 and 2 elaborate upon this core motivation. Holder endorses an idea that has been strongly resisted by theologians sympathetic to Karl Barth, namely, that if it is to retain its place in the modern academy, theology should be expected to justify its claims in broadly like manner to the sciences, which is to say, it should be willing to argue for its claims by appealing only to evidence of a shared, publicly accessible character. He singles out three authors whom he takes to have contributed to broadly the same project as he is embarked upon, namely, Alister McGrath, John Polkinghorne, and Richard Swinburne. All three seem to think that God explains features of our world, and Holder notes the influence of all three upon his own work, but the ensuing pages indicate that the imprint of Swinburne upon Holder's thinking is the greatest of the three. It is with a nod to Swinburne that Holder sets out the framework of Bayes' Theorem that will be utilised throughout the rest of the book. According to Bayes' Theorem, a fact E is evidence for a hypothesis H to the degree that E is more likely given H than given $\neg H$ (the denial of H). Once E has been taken into account, H will be more probable than $\neg H$ just in case the ratio of likelihoods (i.e. how much more likely E is given H than given $\neg H$) is greater than the ratio of priors (i.e. how much more likely H is than $\neg H$ before E was taken into account).

At this point I would note two respects in which Holder could have done more to bring with him those systematic theologians who want to maintain the centrality of the doctrines

of the Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, and Resurrection, but are wary of what they see as the modernist project of trying to produce evidentialist arguments for these doctrines. Firstly, with respect to the claim that theologians must be willing to offer evidentialist arguments for Christian claims if they wish theology to retain its place in the academy, I take it that many theologians see themselves as being engaged in a project of mapping out a system of thought — exploring its implications, considering the manifold ways in which its components relate to one another, probing apparent tensions between them, noting ways in which the parts illuminate one another, and so on. This looks like an activity that properly belongs in the modern academy, especially when the system of thought at issue is one that matters to a great many people. But it seems non-essential to such a project that those doing the mapping out should be required to argue for the truth of the system of thought under consideration. I happen to be sympathetic to Holder's aspiration to present arguments for the truth of the central Christian claims, but recognition of the value and validity of this other project would have gone some way to garnering a listening ear from systematic theologians. The second respect in which Holder could have done more to bring theologians with him concerns the appeal to God as an explanatory hypothesis. In short, some worry that this endeavour carries with it the risk that we begin to relate to God in the I-It mode rather than the I-Thou mode, to use Martin Buber's terminology (2000 [1923]). An acknowledgement of this worry by Holder and an attempt to address it may have helped the book gain more traction with systematic theologians.

Chapter 3 offers a very useful overview of the state of play with respect to two currently popular natural theological arguments for a creator, namely, the Kālām cosmological argument and the argument from the fine-tuning of the universe's fundamental constants and initial conditions. The Kālām cosmological argument contends that the universe began to exist and that anything that begins to exist has a cause (outside itself) for its existence, and hence that the universe was caused by something outside itself. Holder considers two prominent lines of objection to the claim that the universe really did begin to exist, namely, the Hawking-Hartle model on which there was no time $t=0$ and the quantum vacuum model on which the universe came into being allegedly out of "nothing." Holder performs an effective and lucid dissection of both objections. As regards fine-tuning, Holder lays out two broad strategies pursued by opponents of the design hypothesis, which he notes pull in opposite directions from one another: (i) the strategy of trying to show that the universe is not really fine-tuned after all — i.e., that the values of the constants were in fact necessitated by some deeper set of fundamental laws that will eventually be discovered; (ii) appealing to a multiverse, comprised of a vast ensemble of universes that vary with respect to their constant values and initial conditions, such that it is allegedly unsurprising that at least one of these universes is well-suited for life. Holder's critique of strategy (ii) is detailed and meticulous. By contrast, he has relatively little to say about strategy (i), save that it would be "desperately puzzling why the only possible set of laws gives a universe with human beings in it" (48). More on this would have been useful, not least because there are several different senses in which the laws at issue might be said to be "the only possible" set.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the point at which the gears shift out of bare natural theology and into ramified natural theology. By way of motivating the transition, Holder points to the facts of religious diversity and disagreement as necessitating the project of attempting rationally to adjudicate the specific, historical truth-claims of the various world religions: "I agree with Alston and Pannenberg that we must seek to vindicate the primacy of God's revelation in Jesus Christ in this pluralistic context" (78). He then proceeds to consider the writings of Blaise Pascal and Joseph Butler as forerunners to the modern project of ramified natural

theology. Pascal's view of the relationship between faith and reason is notoriously tricky to pin down and Holder is mindful of this, but he highlights one particular strand of Pascal's thought that resonates with his own project: namely, Pascal's claim that Jesus fulfilled prophecies in the Old Testament. Butler is more definitely engaged in the project of ramified natural theology, and arguments for the authenticity of the alleged miracles of Jesus and especially of Jesus' resurrection form the centrepiece of his case for Christianity. Holder values both authors but rightly cautions that there are a number of ways in which their arguments need refining and nuancing in light of modern scholarship on the Bible. Thus the stage is set for Holder's own presentation of the cumulative case for Christianity.

A crucial initial step in that case is the removal of a large obstacle lying in the way: David Hume's argument that testimonial evidence for a miracle is never going to be powerful enough to overcome the vanishingly low intrinsic probability of a miraculous event. Chapter 6 goes about removing this obstacle. In line with other important interpreters of Hume (e.g., Hajek 2008 and Earman 2000), Holder takes the crux of Hume's argument to be that "[O]ne should not believe a report of an event which falls outside the normal pattern of cause and effect" (107). Accordingly, Holder sees Hume as pitting the prior probability of a miracle $[\text{Pr}(M)]$ against the probability that the testifier(s) would testify as they do conditional on there having been no miracle $[\text{Pr}(T|\sim M)]$. In order for it to be reasonable to believe that a miracle has occurred, Hume seems to be saying that $\text{Pr}(T|\sim M)$ must be even smaller than $\text{Pr}(M)$. Holder doesn't have anything especially new to add to the large number of pointed objections to Hume's argument, but he does a fine job of cataloguing them, particularly highlighting Earman's argument that stacking up independent testimonies in principle makes it possible for $\text{Pr}(T|\sim M)$ to get sufficiently small to overcome even a very low prior probability $[\text{Pr}(M)]$, and Roy Sorensen's argument that the more independent miracle reports there are the more likely it becomes that at least one miracle actually occurred. The subsequent chapter will go on to make use of these points.

Chapters 7-10 constitute the extended case that Holder builds for the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate who was raised from the dead. Holder begins with a broad brush but nevertheless valuable overview of the scholarly study of the historical Jesus beginning with its origins in Germany in the late eighteenth century through to its present-day state. The nutshell summary is that early work on the historical Jesus in the German academy was extremely pessimistic about the reliability of the gospels and usually sought to strip away the supernatural elements entirely, leaving a merely human Jesus with a message of liberal humanism that made it puzzling (to say the least) how he ended up being crucified by the Roman authorities. In the past fifty or so years, however, in light of the proper accounting of Jesus' Jewish context that has characterised the so-called Third Quest for the historical Jesus, the centre of gravity of the field has shifted markedly such that mainstream scholarship, especially in the Anglophone world, is considerably more positive about the historical value of the gospels. There is now wide scholarly acceptance of at least the core themes and key events in Jesus' ministry, including his being an itinerant Jewish preacher who proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom of God in and through his own deeds and words, his teaching an ethic of radical self-giving love even to one's enemies, his friendship with people on the margins of society, his gaining widespread fame as a healer and exorcist, and ending up being crucified during the Passover in Jerusalem by the Roman prefect in concert with the Jerusalem religious authorities. One especially striking theme that is attested throughout all our earliest sources about Jesus, including sources that are hostile to him (e.g., the Talmud), is that he performed a huge quantity of what appeared to be miraculous healings. What Holder wants to argue, then, is that there are so many miracles

attributed to Jesus across such a variety of sources that it is probable that at least some genuine miracles were performed by Jesus. Holder notes that Jesus' healings are widely accepted across the spectrum of scholarly opinion today. There is an issue here, however, that Holder doesn't confront as directly as he might have done: many New Testament scholars are committed to methodological naturalism, so presumably it is the case that in granting that Jesus performed healings they are presumably committed to thinking that he did so via naturalistic mechanisms. It would have been beneficial to Holder's case, then, for him to have engaged more explicitly with the possibility that the healings were entirely the result of naturalistic mechanisms (albeit dimly understood ones). The shape of a critique of that hypothesis isn't too difficult to make out. Roughly, it could be pointed out that even if naturalistic mechanisms can account for some of the healings, the great variety of kinds of physical ailments that are reported to have been healed by Jesus — many of which are still to this day not regarded as psychosomatic or as susceptible to spontaneous regression (see Twelftree 2004; Keener 2011) — makes it very unlikely that naturalistic mechanisms are capable of accounting for more than a fraction of the healings.

Chapter 8 broaches the issue of prophecy that is allegedly fulfilled by Jesus. Most of the prophecy is contained within the Old Testament, but there is an intriguing reference to Plato's speculation about how a man of perfect righteousness would likely end up being bound, scourged, and impaled by the powers that be. Holder's treatment of this topic is commendable for the way it steers a tight course between on the one hand the kind of undisciplined exercise in cherry-picking the Old Testament for details that are allegedly predictive of aspects of Jesus' life, and on the other hand, the refusal of many Biblical scholars to countenance the possibility that the Old Testament contains anything that could be considered as predictive prophecy. Holder is sensitive to insights about the function of Hebrew prophecy in its immediate context, but he nevertheless maintains the thing that critical Biblical scholarship tends to deny but has by no means refuted: that the Hebrew prophets sometimes spoke better than they knew. This allows him to grant, for example, that the author of Deutero-Isaiah intended the figure of the Suffering Servant as a metaphor for the nation of Israel, and yet to maintain that God may have intended the Suffering Servant to foreshadow Jesus' passion. Holder concludes the chapter by categorising items of ostensible prophecy with regard to whether or not Jesus would have had any control over their fulfilment. Clearly it is those items over which Jesus had no control that are the more evidentially interesting. The taxonomy is valuable, but Holder fails to consider the objection that Jesus could have anticipated that his temple-clearing actions would provoke the authorities into crucifying him, so that his passion could be viewed as partially within his control.

Chapters 9 and 10 complete the case with a consideration of the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Holder's survey of the evidence is lucid, albeit similar in content to what one finds in the numerous existing scholarly books on the topic. In his catalogue of historical evidence he includes the following data points: Jesus' death by Roman crucifixion; his burial in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea; the discovery of the tomb empty by female followers of Jesus; apparent post-mortem appearances of Jesus to individuals and groups of his followers; the conversion of Saul of Tarsus from persecutor to proclaimer of Jesus; and the very early designation of the first day of the week (i.e. Sunday) as the holiest day by the first Jewish Christians. Holder works through various naturalistic hypotheses (swoon and revival; women went to the wrong tomb; deliberate fraud by the disciples; mass hallucinations), arguing that none of them gets significant purchase on the data. Given the primacy Holder accords to the crucial but markedly minimalistic list of resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8,

however, it isn't fully clear how Holder would take himself to be able to rule out the sort of paranormal hypothesis that Dale Allison (2021) has sketched, on which the disciples in effect had veridical visions of Jesus' spirit but not a physical body. Put another way, very little argument was offered for supposing that the robust corporeal appearances narrated in the gospels are to be taken seriously. The discussion is brought into land with a comparison of the two quite different strategies for arguing for the resurrection advanced by Timothy and Lydia McGrew, on the one hand, and Richard Swinburne, on the other. The McGrews argue that the Bayes' factor (i.e., the degree to which the historical evidence supports the hypothesis of a bodily resurrection) is so great that it can overcome even a vanishingly low prior probability. They derive a very large Bayes' factor chiefly by treating the experiences of the risen Jesus had by each disciple as being probabilistically independent of one another. Swinburne, by contrast, offers a much more cautious estimate of the Bayes' factor, and thus sees it as necessary to argue that the prior probability is not vanishingly low, something he does by appealing to general natural theological evidence for theism and for the claim that God would become incarnate in a human being and would perform various deeds, deeds which in fact Jesus did perform. Holder offers something of a synthesis of these two approaches, arguing in support of the McGrews's large estimate of the Bayes' factor, and inserting that into Swinburne's case with its allegedly elevated prior probability of Jesus' being raised.

In sum, this book offers a compelling, wide-ranging exploration of the contours of a cumulative case for Christian theism, which takes account of the latest work in a formidable array of scholarly disciplines. Despite a few gaps and oversights that are perhaps to be expected in a book that is so ambitious in its scope, it constitutes an impressively thorough and powerful case for the central claims of Christianity.

References

- Allison, Dale C. 2021. *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History*. Eerdmans.
- Buber, Martin. 2000 [1923]. *I and Thou*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. Scribner Book Company.
- Earman, John D. 2000. *Hume's Abject Failure*. Oxford University Press.
- Hájek, Alan. 2008. "Are Miracles Chimerical?" *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 1: 82-103.
- Keener, Craig S. 2011. *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*. 2 vols. Baker Academic.
- Twelftree, Graham. 2004. "The History of Miracles in the History of Jesus". In *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, edited by Scott McKnight and Grant Osborne, 191-208. Baker Academic.