

NATURAL LAW: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION AND BIBLICAL DEFENSE

Reviewed by Louis Markos, Houston Baptist University

Over the last decade, I have had the privilege of speaking for classical Christian schools and conferences across the country. Imagine a Jesuit school from a century ago that was fully committed to the goodness, truth, and beauty of the Christian faith and the Western intellectual tradition, and then re-imagine that school from a Protestant rather than Catholic perspective, and you will have a sense of what the best classical Christian schools of today offer their students. While such schools tend to be broadly evangelical, the majority of them are Reformed in doctrine and outlook. That this is so is attested to by the high percentage of schools that bear the names Geneva, Providence, or Grace.

When I first started speaking for classical Christian schools, I was surprised to find how many of them were Reformed. My reason for this was that most of the Calvinists I had encountered in my college years were not the type who would have been eager, or even willing, to learn real truths from such pre-Christian writers as Homer and Virgil, Plato and Aristotle, Sophocles and Aeschylus, Herodotus and Thucydides, Cicero and Horace. Raised on a view of total depravity so strong that it bordered on utter depravity, many of the Calvinists I knew would have expressed skepticism as to whether unregenerate pagan writers could have had access to wisdom worthy of close study by regenerate believers.

BOOK REVIEW:
*NATURAL LAW: A BRIEF
INTRODUCTION AND
BIBLICAL DEFENSE*
DAVID HAINES AND
ANDREW A. FULFORD
DAVENANT PRESS, 2017
142 PAGES, PAPER, \$11.95

And yet, here were scores of faithful, Calvinist-inspired schools devoting a large portion of their curriculum to studying pre-Christian literature, not to mention learning the dead language of Latin! How could such things be?

GENERAL REVELATION AND NATURAL LAW

The answer was that these schools had reclaimed fully the vital distinction between general and special revelation, a foundational distinction that is laid out in the opening chapters of Calvin's *Institutes* and Paul's Epistle to the Romans (which letter I often refer to facetiously as the "Calvinist Bible"). While

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God speaks directly to his people (special revelation) through the Bible, the prophets, and Christ himself, he communicates with all men indirectly (general revelation) through creation (Romans 1:20) and the law he has written in our conscience (2:15).

It is precisely because the highest pagan writers had access to general revelation and because all who read their work, regenerate or unregenerate, possess the capacity for reason, that the classical literature of ancient Greece and Rome can serve as a vehicle for truths that point to, rather than contradict, the truths revealed in the Bible. Granted, such limited wisdom perceived by our limited human reason cannot of itself teach us that Christ died for our sins and rose again. Still, it can exercise the mind in a good and noble way, instructing it in virtue and training it to wrestle with questions and issues of perennial, and even eternal, relevance.

Traditionally, God's general revelation, conveyed to us through nature, conscience, and reason, has been linked to the parallel concept of natural law, an innate understanding of right and wrong that God has inscribed in the hearts of all people at all times. In *Natural Law: A Brief Introduction and Biblical Defense*, David Haines and Andrew Fulford offer this carefully nuanced definition of natural law: "that order or rule of human conduct which is (1) based upon human nature as created by God, (2) knowable by all men, through human intuition and reasoning alone (beginning from his observations of creation, in general, and human nature, in particular), independent of any particular divine revelation provided through a divine spokesperson; and, thus (3) normative for all human beings" (p. 5).

The Calvinists I knew in my college years would have balked at this definition and written natural law off as a Catholic concept. Not so the Reformed Haines and Fulford or the Reformed architects of the classical Christian movement. And not so, they would all agree, Calvin himself.

Haines and Fulford are members of the Davenant Institute which "supports the renewal of Christian wisdom for the contemporary church [and] seeks to sponsor historical scholarship at the intersection of the church and academy, build networks of friendship and collaboration within the Reformed and evangelical world, and equip the saints with time-tested resources for faithful public witness." Their brief but incisive book represents one in a series of Davenant Guides which "seek to offer short and accessible introductions to key issues of current debate in theology and ethics, drawing on a magisterial Protestant perspective and defending its contemporary relevance today."

Neither Haines, a French Canadian professor of apologetics and philosophy who founded the Association Axiome and the Christian Philosophy and Apologetics Center, nor Fulford, a PhD candidate at McGill University (Montreal, Quebec), mentions the classical Christian movement. Nevertheless, their firm but irenic call for a robust understanding of natural law that lines up, philosophically and biblically, with Reformed thought complements and reinforces the classical Christian vision. I found their book both challenging and refreshing and believe it merits a wide audience, especially among Reformed Americans who are concerned with the slow decay of public virtue.

NATURAL LAW AND THE TAO

In the first half of the book, Haines establishes a philosophical foundation for natural law that complements C. S. Lewis's argument, in *Mere Christianity* and *The Abolition of Man*, that a universal, cross-cultural moral-ethical code (Lewis famously dubbed it the Tao) exists and points to a divine law maker. Like Lewis's argument for the Tao, Haines's defense of natural law ultimately rests on a belief, shared by Aristotle, Aquinas, and Calvin, that God is the cause of all things and has created man and nature alike with an essential telos

(Greek for “purposeful end”). God, writes Haines, is “the intelligent Creator who governs the entirety of creation, directing each being to its proper end” (16).

Over against the nominalists of the Middle Ages—and, I would add, the postmodernists of today—Haines asserts that “created essences exist, and . . . can be known” (23). If we, and the natural world around us, do not possess a created essence, or if we cannot know that essence, then natural law disappears—as does “the very possibility of dialogue and philosophy” (24). When we encounter a human invention, explains Haines, we cannot determine its true telos merely by discerning what it is made of (what Aristotle called its material cause) and who made it (its efficient cause). We must discern as well its formal cause (what kind of thing it is) and its final cause (what it was made for).

If we want to discover what the invention is for, and thus gauge its final cause, we can do so “in one of two ways: (1) finding out, by experience, what it *does*, that is—what is the primary activity or effect of the invention or (2) asking the inventor” (28). To accomplish the latter, we need special revelation; to accomplish the former, general revelation and natural law are sufficient. If we use our resources of general revelation/natural law to study ourselves, we will discover that we, as unique inventions of God, are rational animals who, unlike the lower animals, can choose to conform or rebel against our created essence and proper telos.

True, we can only find our final telos and chief happiness in God, but we can use our “knowledge of human nature [to] discover normative laws for all human beings . . . [and to] make objective moral judgments concerning the relative goodness of individual human beings . . . [and] individual human actions” (38-39). That one can find precisely this kind of penetrating insight in Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and Virgil is why I share the commitment of classical Christian schools to studying the pagan classics.

NATURAL LAW IN THE BIBLE

In the second half of the book, Fulford grounds the philosophical theories propounded in the first half in the special revelation of the Bible. As expected, Fulford focuses on those key passages that are most often highlighted by defenders of natural law and/or general revelation: Romans 1-2, Paul’s speeches to the men of Lystra and of Athens (Acts 14, 17), and Psalm 19, which asserts that not only the Law but the heavens themselves speak of the glory of God. But he considers as well lesser-known passages that also assert the existence of a natural created order that can be perceived by saved and unsaved alike.

Consider, writes Fulford, how the pagan Jethro (Exodus 18) uses general revelation to offer wise and godly advice to his Jewish son-in-law Moses, who has already been to Mount Sinai and received the special revelation of the Ten Commandments. Jethro’s advice does not come from the Torah, which Moses knew, but from his own “common sense” (54). Or consider Deuteronomy 4:5-6, where God assures the Jews that when the pagan Canaanites see their behavior, they will recognize their law as both wise and good. That is to say, “the nations will look on and see how obeying this law leads to flourishing, to human good” (55).

Such wisdom books as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes all attest to the existence of a moral order in nature and in human nature that can and must be understood and heeded. In “Proverbs, and the Scriptures more generally . . . God condemns the human race because humanity has actively and intentionally spurned the moral order that constantly surrounds it, and which ‘calls out in the streets’ ” (66).

As for the New Testament, Fulford perceptively points out that in his sermons, Jesus just as often appeals to nature (general revelation) as he does to the Old Testament (special revelation). This is most evident in the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12), which presupposes

that “all people actually know what is good for them, on some level, since they have desires that ought to be met” (82). After all, we cannot do good unto others unless we can correctly discern, via the natural law, what is good for ourselves.

Fulford also argues persuasively that Jesus’ teaching on marriage is not only grounded in the inspired words of Genesis (1:27 and 2:20-24) but in the natural complementarity of the sexes that is evident to all who have eyes to see. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus appeals to common sense and the manifest order of things. Indeed, writes Fulford, “Jesus’ mission was to restore God’s world to the Creator’s original purposes for it, and his practical guidance constantly directed his disciples to act consistent with this end” (84).

To find salvation in Christ requires some form of special revelation, but to understand the nature and necessity of virtue for creatures made in the image of God, general revelation and the natural law are sufficient, effective, God-ordained guides. Our age is in desperate need of the knowledge and practice of virtue, not only in our government and our media, but even more so in our schools. Haines and Fulford’s book offers a good start.