

Gifford Lectures corner

Reflections of a Gifford Committee convenor

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In 1887, Lord Adam Gifford left substantial sums of money to the four ancient Scottish universities to maintain series of lectures intended to promote and diffuse ‘the study of Natural Theology in the widest sense of that term, in other words, the Knowledge of God.’ Lord Gifford was an eminent lawyer who, in the words of one historian of the Gifford lectures, the distinguished Catholic physicist Stanley L. Jaki (himself a Gifford lecturer¹), ‘with the naiveté of a zealous amateur in philosophy as well as theology hoped that natural theology would deliver far more than it actually can.’² The lectures were, in fact, a late offspring of Scottish Enlightenment thought, a cultural and intellectual inheritance with which they struggled from the very beginning as they attracted, and still can attract, some of the major thinkers of the time as speakers – all of them, until 1972 when Hannah Arendt gave the lectures in Aberdeen, being men. In his will, Gifford expressed his wish that his lectures would expose to popular audiences:

¹ Edinburgh, 1974–76.

² Stanley L. Jaki, *Lord Gifford and His Lectures: A Centenary Retrospect* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 41.



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The Knowledge of God, the Infinite, the All, the First and Only Cause, the One and the Sole Substance, the Sole Being, the Sole Reality, and the Sole Existence, the Knowledge of His Nature and Attributes, the Knowledge of the Relations which men and the whole universe bear to Him, the Knowledge of the Nature and Foundation of Ethics or Morals, and of all Obligations and Duties thence arising.³

Apart from the somewhat overblown language used here, the concerns and liberalism of the Gifford lectures were in many ways close to those of John Henry Newman in his celebrated lectures given in Dublin and most fully published as *The Scope and Nature of University Education* (1859), though it is unlikely that Gifford ever read Newman's work.

When the first Gifford lectures were delivered in 1888 at the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews,⁴ by far the most celebrated lecturer was Professor Max Müller in the University of Glasgow, his lectureship continuing for four series until 1892. Müller was Oxford University's first professor of comparative philology, an orientalist and scholar of Sanskrit, best known for his editing of what would become the fifty volumes of *The Sacred Books of the East*. Müller's lectures were published in three volumes, *Natural Religion* (1889), *Physical Religion* (1891), and *Anthropological Religion* (1892). From the start controversy arose over a key element in Gifford's vision for his lectures – that their close attention to natural theology excluded the subject of miracles. In his first course of lectures Müller, who was no theologian and certainly not a New Testament critic, attracted the wrath of the Roman Catholic church in Scotland by his dismissal of what he called 'Catholic miracle-mongering', expressing his belief that the scientific investigation of religion rendered any belief in miracles unnecessary. Later, in his third course of lectures, Müller celebrated Jesus as the prophet of people of faith without any reliance on miracles.⁵ He was not aware, it would appear, of the long debate on this subject in the nineteenth century.

Later in the twentieth century, the theologian Karl Barth delivered his

³ Quoted in Jaki, *Lord Gifford and His Lectures*, 5.

⁴ The first lectures in Aberdeen were not given until 1889.

⁵ Max Müller, *Anthropological Religion* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892), xix–xx.



lectures in Aberdeen between 1936 and 1938, publishing them under the title *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation: Recalling the Scottish Confession of 1560* (1938).⁶ Barth spoke in almost complete contradiction to the wishes of Lord Gifford, expressing some hostility to the notion of natural religion and in defence of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In fairness to Barth, he was at first unwilling to accept the invitation from the University of Aberdeen until he was given the assurance that the mind of the Gifford Committee was broad enough to sustain his clear theological position. ‘Natural religion’, it was clear, was a problematic term.

Almost from the beginning, the Gifford lectureships were highly international, not least because of the generous funding provided by their founder.⁷ They quickly outstripped the specific intellectual and religious aims of Lord Gifford’s will as they attracted philosophers, theologians, sociologists of religion and later scientists and literary critics. The balance between the academic and the popular lecture was never easy to maintain, though the Giffords quickly produced some books of lasting distinction and value, perhaps the most famous being William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).⁸ As the lectures continued to flourish in the twentieth century they became associated with many of the leading intellects of the day, many though by no means all of them theologians, philosophers or philosophers of religion. Their names include Albert Schweitzer, Reinhold Niebuhr, William Temple, John Dewey, Arnold Toynbee and John Macmurray. After the invitation by Aberdeen to Hannah Arendt in the early 1970s, women became more prominent, lecturers including Iris Murdoch (Edinburgh, 1981–82), Mary Douglas (Edinburgh, 1989–90), Mary Warnock (Glasgow, 1992), Judith Butler (Glasgow, 2018), and Linda Zagzebski (St Andrews, 2015).

The Gifford lectures continue to flourish to the present time, and here I will become a little more personal. Between 2006 and 2014 I was granted the privilege of being convenor of the Glasgow University Gifford

⁶ Translated by J. L. M. Haire and Ian Henderson.

⁷ To give some sense of their affluence, in 1888 the stipend for each series of lectures was £400, which was about twice the annual salary of an average professor in Scotland. An early German lecturer in Edinburgh, Otto Pfleiderer, remarked that ‘*Die Ehre ist nicht gross, aber der Gehalt ist kolossal*’ [The honour is not great, but the honorarium is colossal] (quoted in Jaki, *Lord Gifford and His Lectures*, 10.)

⁸ First given as Gifford lectures in Edinburgh, 1900–02.



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Committee and thus able to steer, to some extent, the courses of lectures at that university. Money was still plentiful enough to allow us to invite more or less whom we wished, though it has to be admitted that, despite the distinction of the lectures, it was sometimes hard to engender the institutional support that these events, jewels in the crown of the Scottish academies, warranted. At their best the Giffords can still attract huge and very mixed audiences: Judith Butler in 2018 packed the vast Bute Hall in Glasgow night after night. Nor should the list of recent lecturers be underestimated, among them Bruno Latour (Edinburgh, 2012–13), Rowan Williams (Edinburgh, 2013–14), Alvin Plantinga (St Andrews, 2004–05) and John Habgood (Aberdeen, 2000–01). But it is hard not to sense that the intellectual energy of the early days, not least within the universities themselves as they are beset by contemporary conditions in the academic world, has waned overall.

Allow me then to offer some insight into how the Gifford Committee in Glasgow, when I was its convenor, set about maintaining Lord Gifford's vision some 120 years after his attempt to define the purposes of his lectures. When I arrived as convenor, the lecturer for 2003–04 was already on his way to Glasgow. It was the distinguished Oxford philosopher Simon Blackburn. His lectures were published in a book that is at once accessible and challenging, its title being *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2005), published under Penguin Books' category of 'popular philosophy' and widely read, although the original audiences in the university were small. In his Preface, Blackburn is perfectly well aware of the nature of the Gifford tradition:

Lord Gifford's will is a shining example of a kind of liberalism that is often sneered at, and seldom equalled. A theist himself, he made it very clear that the lectures he founded were not for theists only, but for any serious thinkers to explore serious questions about the place of humanity in the world. I do not believe that the gods of human beings do much credit to their inventors and interpreters, but I hope my lectures qualified as serious.⁹

I did not share Blackburn's religious perspective, but I deeply respected

⁹ Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006), ix–x.



his seriousness and in my own way on the Glasgow Committee sought to uphold, with equal gravity, the spirit of Lord Gifford's will in the context of the early twenty-first century. Interpreting Gifford's late expression of the Scottish Enlightenment for our own times was never going to be easy and I was grateful for the philosophical wisdom, extensive learning and guidance of my colleague and former convenor of the Committee, Professor Alexander Broadie, himself a Gifford lecturer at Aberdeen (1994–95).¹⁰ I often wished that we had spent more time in our committee meetings discussing the intellectual nature of our task in appointing lecturers, but I was at least clear in my own mind that our job was not to follow the latest fad of the academy but to find the seminal minds in our generation who could address with seriousness a vision that was at once theological and philosophical. This should not exclude the scientific dimension either, but only inasmuch as it addressed Lord Gifford's deepest concerns. It seemed right to turn first to one of the most distinguished Scottish theologians of our time (though his training was at Glasgow in philosophy under Professor Broadie), David Fergusson, now Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge. Professor Fergusson's lectures were given to large and appreciative audiences in Glasgow in 2008 under the title "Religion and its Recent Critics", published in 2009 as *Faith and its Critics: A Conversation*. These lectures were important insofar as they opened up broad questions, rather than offering ready answers, and at the same time they steadied the boat of the intellectual quest upon which we were engaged. In the Conclusion to his book Fergusson refers to another distinguished Scottish theologian, Donald MacKinnon, who

[...] once wrote of the ways in which the differences between faith and unbelief run too deep to be quickly resolved by any intellectual gambit. There is no quick-fix, readily available argument that will bring a final resolution of the questions posed by religion and its critics. And we should beware, therefore, of attempts too quickly to defeat our opponents.¹¹

¹⁰ Alexander Broadie's *A History of Scottish Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) won the Saltire Society's Scottish History Book of the Year award in 2009.

¹¹ David Fergusson, *Faith and its Critics: A Conversation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 178.



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Fergusson's lectures were a much-needed breath of fresh air, and they paved the way for a one-off Gifford lecture given in Glasgow in 2009 by a very different figure from across the Atlantic, Professor Charles Taylor, fresh from the publication of his great book *A Secular Age* (2007).¹² His lecture was entitled "The Necessity of Secularist Regimes" and it continued his profound exploration of the place of religion in our societies, in a real sense a universe away from the world of Lord Gifford in 1888.

I felt that we had made a real start and was delighted when the Glasgow committee agreed that we now invite the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo as our next lecturer. Vattimo was emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Turin and as a Christian Democrat and a Member of the European Parliament was at the very heart of the envisioning of its constitution with Giscard d'Estaing and others. He opposed adding the specific term 'Christian values' to the constitution on the basis of the provocative argument that 'the force of the Gospels and of Jesus' teaching provides the foundation of the secularity of any democratic state today.'¹³ In his Glasgow lectures (and their accompanying student seminars) Vattimo gave us the basis of his post-metaphysical 'weak' thinking – and we were aware that we were present at an event of profound significance. The lectures were published with the text of earlier lectures given by Vattimo in 1998 in Leuven under the title *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy* (2016), offered, in Vattimo's own words as '[...] a long and rather unsystematic work of reflection on the theme of the dissolution of objectivity or of reality itself, which began with [my] first expressions of "weak thought" in the early 1980s.'¹⁴

This was difficult territory, but its importance was indicated by the large audiences which came to listen on successive evenings. Like Fergusson's lectures, Vattimo's talks invited a further stage, and accordingly we sought that from another major European thinker, also a Roman Catholic, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion.

This was to be my last series of Gifford Lectures as convenor of the

¹² *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) is based on Taylor's earlier Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh (1998–99).

¹³ Santiago Zabala, "Introduction: Gianni Vattimo and Weak Philosophy", in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Zabala (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 28.

¹⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*, trans. Robert T. Valgenti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1.



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Glasgow Committee and Professor Marion in his lectures offered a direct conversation with the vision of Lord Gifford. Published as *Givenness and Revelation* (2016), Marion's lectures reviewed the concept of 'revelation' following upon an initial examination into the roots of 'natural theology' and their tension with 'revealed knowledge of God' or *sacra doctrina*. The whole discussion was held within the phenomenological tradition in which Marion stood. I felt, or rather hoped, that Lord Gifford would have approved.

My time with the Glasgow Gifford lectures was drawing to a close and I had little control over the lectures that followed, though I continued to attend them with enthusiasm, especially those given by Professor Judith Butler in 2018 under the title "My Life, Your Life: Equality and the Philosophy of Non-violence". I remain convinced of the importance of the Gifford lectures as being at the heart of the ancient and distinguished intellectual tradition upheld by the Scottish universities, and if nothing else they stand as a testimony that Scotland, though still bound within the political union of the United Kingdom, has a long independent intellectual tradition sustained by four ancient universities (to which many more recent and distinguished academic institutions have now been added), in contrast perhaps, to only two in England. Long before it became wealthy as a trading and industrial city, Glasgow was a European centre of learning and as long as the peculiarly fertile tradition of the Gifford lectures remains not only in Glasgow but in Edinburgh, St Andrews and Aberdeen as well, it will, I hope, continue to be so.

