

## PHYSICO-THEOLOGICAL LECTURES OF ROBERT MILN

**Keywords:** Robert Miln or Milne, physico-theology, sacred physics, unitarianism

**Słowa kluczowe:** Robert Miln lub Milne, fizyko-teologia, fizyka sakralna, unitarianizm

**Schlüsselwörter:** Robert Miln oder Milne, Physiko-Theologie, heilige Physik, Unitarismus

Very little is known about Robert Miln/Milne. He lived in Aberdeen and had a licentiate of the Church of Scotland. To preserve the orthodoxy of faith, a Presbyterian congregation in Carlisle called Miln to be its pastor, but the members of the church were soon disappointed because of his unorthodox leanings and eventually seceded from his ministrations in the 1770s. He apparently remained a popular figure as testified by a list of over 1200 subscribers to his 1786 book. He seems to have remained an active preacher as attested by the publication of three of his sermons. He died at an old age in 1800<sup>1</sup>.

### FAITH AND REASON

Physico-theology was a prevalent theological paradigm at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the age of the enlightenment, physico-theologians used the results of the state-of-the-art scholarly research in defense of the validity of the Bible. The microscope and the telescope significantly extended the scope of the observable universe, and the scholarly accomplishments were used by some to undermine religious beliefs, by others, to justify them. The overarching problem was the role of faith and reason in human pursuits. Is reason a handmaid of faith, or should faith recognize the priority of reason? At the age of the prominence of sci-

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<sup>1</sup> An obituary, *The Gentleman's Magazine* 88 (1800), p. 699; Jonathan Howard Westaway, *Scottish influences upon the Reformed Churches in North-West England, c. 1689–1829: a study of the ministry within the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches in Lancashire Cumberland and Westmorland*, PhD diss., University of Lancaster 1996, pp. 182, 190, 361.

ence, the latter sentiment was more and more widely accepted, even among some theologians.

Miln, an ecclesiastic, believed very strongly in the Biblical account concerning physical aspects of the world, but he also believed in the power of human reason. In fact, since “reason and revelation proceed from the same fountain, ... therefore the one can never contradict or supersede the other, for they mutually support one another.”<sup>2</sup> That is, revelation and faith do not supersede reason. Revelation speaks about the first cause, and reason explains its meaning and proves the usefulness of revelation; thus, the book of nature and the book of grace support one another (63).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, as Miln wrote about his motivation, “convinced that reason and revelation mutually support each other, and that true philosophy is the best defence against scepticism and infidelity, I have ventured, on these principles, to contribute my mite to the support of sacred history” (iii) and this mite, his *Physico-theological lectures*, should be an expression of his support of the “useful truth and rational religion” (v). There are some doctrines accumulated over time that made their way to Christian religion, but they should be eradicated. “The greatest absurdities, may pass current for articles of faith, till they are tried at the tribunal of right reason, (which can never contradict revelation)” (52). This is where reason, in Miln’s mind, can be used: as a way of eliminating some unorthodox and harmful elements of faith; so it looks like reason may have an upper hand over faith, at least over some elements of faith that contradict reason. Miln did not explain why in the presence of such a contradiction precedence should not be given to faith.

## THE EARLY EARTH HISTORY

The main goal of physico-theology was to prove the existence and the attributes of God from the orderliness and harmonious workings of the world in general and of particular parts of the world. Some of that can be found in Miln’s *Lectures*.

All elements of nature speak about God’s wisdom. When creating the world, God “erected a kingdom of Providence, and in it established such laws as bespeak the infinite wisdom, power, and goodness of their Author.”<sup>4</sup> And so, “the construction and configuration of plants” point to the wisdom and goodness of God (84). Each region produces plants most suited for the inhabitants as food and medicine (85). The moon allows humans to see in the night and is also responsible for the tides of the sea which prevent water from spoiling (68). Thanks to air, humans are not blinded by the sunlight; due to air, winds exist which purify air, allow for sailing and thus for “friendship, trade and commerce” (71); air enables the formation of clouds and thus rain; it enables life through respiration; people can hear one another due to air and enjoy music (72). The earth has an optimum distance from the sun (73). Sea

<sup>2</sup> R. Miln, *National sins the cause of national sufferings: a fast sermon delivered on March 8, 1797*, Carlisle: W. Thompson 1797, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers in parentheses are page numbers in Robert Miln, *A course of physico-theological lectures upon the state of the world, from the creation to the deluge*, Carlisle: J. Milliken 1786.

<sup>4</sup> Miln, *National*, p. 4.

water was salty from the beginning to preserve water from putrefaction. The sea is the source of food, of vapors to make rain (77). Mountains show the power of God and humble the pride of man showing how small human works are in comparison with God's work (78). They stop clouds and give rise to rivers (79). "The workmanship of God" can also be seen in various instincts, e.g., in the migration of birds (88), and in the maintenance of the proportion between various kinds of animals (89). In sum, every element of nature points to the purpose for which it was created by the good and providential God and "every new discovery we make, gives us clearer and more exalted ideas, of the primary agent and great author of all" (314).

Such a reliance of the physical data allowed Miln to make a theological statement "that the earth is not eternal, nor arose from chance, appears a self-evident truth, when we consider both the nature, and the regularity of those materials of which it is composed. The harmony of its parts, and the apparent unity of its design, bespeak it the workmanship of one being" (26). A thorough investigation of nature becomes the basis of the self-evident truth that God created the world particularly in the light of the fact that there is no "inbred and innate knowledge of a God" (159). The investigation of the world leads directly to the certainty of the non-random origin of the world and thus to the certainty of the existence of its Creator and to the recognition of His attributes: power, wisdom, and goodness. Moreover, in his book, Miln concentrated on the presentation of the early Biblical history as viewed from the theological perspective and from the perspective of natural science, particularly geology and physics of his times. In this sense, his book belongs to what is sometimes termed sacred physics, Biblical physics, and the like, as presented, among others, in the works of Scheuchzer, Nieuwentijt, and Burnet. Miln himself relied on the works of Whitehurst, De Luc, Buffon, Whiston and others, who presented the early history of the earth, occasionally interjecting his own speculations (v, 294). In Miln's view, an amplification of the Biblical record with scientific data is needed now since "when Moses wrote the history of the creation, it was not his intention, to enter into a minute and philosophical discussion of that subject. The account which he gives us is purely historical, and calculated to raise in our minds such affecting ideas of this stupendous work, as might best promote the purposes of piety and religion" (26).

As Miln saw it, the earth was in chaos at first and it is unknown for how long (29) and along with the earth, time was created; before that there was eternity (27). Light, the noblest creation in the inanimate world (31), is "a luminous body of itself," not emitted by any body; consider a burning flame of one inch diameter; it can be seen three miles away; it is incredible that such a small body could emit so many particles to fill such a large volume. Therefore, it was possible to create light before the sun (33) and the creation of light was really disentangling luminous particles from matter (34).<sup>5</sup> The creation of the sun and the moon on the fourth day of creation was not really creation. On that day, the atmosphere became sufficiently cleared to transmit light so that the sun became visible (40). "It is unnatural to suppose that the earth was created before the sun" which regulates the motion of bodies from the center of the solar system. The same can be said about the stars (41). Each star is

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<sup>5</sup> The view of light as a separate substance was advocated by Pluche (32).

a sun with a planetary system, apparently, as quoted from Ferguson's *Astronomy*, with "peoples with myriads of intelligent beings, formed for endless progression in perfection and felicity" (42).

At the creation, "the different parts of the mass would be arranged according to their specific gravities, and the superficial parts would be of all others the most light and friable; while ores of metals, and such ponderous substances would lie deep in the bowels of the earth" with some "primary fire" still inside the globe. When this fire was "disengaged by fermentation," it surfaced through volcanoes and earthquakes disturbing "the whole mass" in the process by mixing the original strata (173, 235–237) bringing ores to the surface. This was a curse, but, in fact, it proved to be beneficial to the humankind by making, among others, ores accessible to people for their use (174). This view of the universal catastrophe as a result of the fall seems to be Miln's original input to sacred physics (cf. v).<sup>6</sup>

Some believe that God created all creatures that would ever exist. "We think it impossible, that innumerable myriads of creatures should be contained in the ovary of the first female. But consider "the quantity of effluvia or exhalation" coming from various bodies that can contain more particles than all the human race (46–47). By this, Miln subscribed to the then-popular biological theory of emboîtement that maintained that the seed of each creation contains the seed of all progeny.

As to the fall, Miln said that the prohibition of not eating from the tree of knowledge was made as a caution, but also as a test of obedience (114). That indicates that all rational beings when "they are first sent to life, must pass thro' a state of trial and probation, before they can be confirmed in happiness and glory," which includes angels (115). Their sin resulted from their limited nature and finite understanding. "The desire of becoming their own masters" led to succumbing to the devil's temptation (131). Adam followed Eve in eating the fruit; being "lost to reflection, and admiring the charms of his beautiful wife, resolved to share in her fate whatever it might be" (145). In any event, the first parents were probably not expelled right away to be able to acquire "the arts of living" enabling them to live outside paradise (131). In all this, allowing humans to fall may have been "the greatest instance of divine wisdom and goodness ... in raising human nature to the highest degree of purity and perfection" and in contributing to the highest happiness by making them depended on Him (158).

As to the flood, Miln believed that not all animals were rescued in the ark; the large ones were left behind as testified by some skeletons found in Miln's times (299) and also animals that were far away from the ark (307). The universal flood was not all bad. All "the great revolutions" were "conducive to the happiness of mankind, in its truest and completest sense." The flood "lessened temptation and removed from the world many incitements to vice." The destruction of people who lived before the flood was an act of mercy since letting them live longer would allow them to sink deeper into sin. Also, the memory of the flood for people living after it would be a warning about the consequences of sin (373). "The luxuriant productions of the

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<sup>6</sup> Miln claimed that after the fall, the earth underwent a change through fire that was then near the centre of the globe. His theory was followed by James Hutton, Samuel Miller, *A Brief retrospect of the eighteenth century*, New York: T. and J. Swords 1803, pt. 1, vol. 1, p. 173.

first earth served only to excite and foment the lusts of man," the temptation which was reduced after the flood when supposedly the earth became less fertile (375). The life of people became shorter after the flood to force them to think about death more intensely and thus about the consequences of the current life for the afterlife (377).

In all this, the early history of the earth, the geological history and the early history of humankind, point directly the power of God and His providential care which, according to Miln, can be detected in the worst of disasters.

### UNORTHODOXY

There are certain elements of Miln's presentation which are not quite possible to reconcile with the Christian religion.

Right at the beginning, when discussing the first verses of *Genesis*, Miln made some remarks about the Spirit which was hovering above waters. In his view, the word "spirit" generally signifies in the Scripture "any active, hidden principle, or secret and efficacious cause, and when applied to God, it means the influence and exertion of his power," and thus, the Spirit that moved over the water was the exercise of God's power whereby God "impresses upon the chaos ... the laws of nature, ... those rules which establish a regular and uniform connection between secondary causes and effects" (29). That is, this Spirit was not the Holy Spirit of the Christian theology, but just a metaphorical representation of God's power over His creation. Miln spoke about the "holy being," God (124, 213, cf. 157), God's holy name Robert Miln, *The blessedness of those who die in the Lord. A sermon occasioned by the death of Thomas Benson, Esq. of Carlisle*, Newcastle upon Tyne: T. Slack 1778, p. 16. but never about the Holy Spirit (or the Holy Ghost). It is interesting that, as stated by his contemporaries, Miln "embraced Unitarian opinions" leading to a split of his church<sup>7</sup>. That is, he rejected the idea of the Trinity, which, arguably, is the most essential part of the Christian religion. If he accepted the unitarian view, then Arianism was not far behind. And, in fact, some traces of it can be found in his *Lectures*.

Miln spoke about Christ with the utmost respect and reverence as the Savior who through His self-sacrifice opened the door to immortality for the humankind. He said that "many pious and learned men" considered Christ to be an "organ or medium, an illustrious being, called by way of eminence the only begotten and well beloved Son of God," through which God, "infinitely beyond the reach of all created beings," communicated with the world. Emmanuel was "delegated by his Father to create, superintend, and finally judge the world." And so, Emmanuel appeared to the first parents, to the patriarchs, and gave the law from Mount Sinai. "In the full[n]ess of time [Emmanuel] was made flesh and dwelt among us," died for the deliverance of sinners and ascended to heaven (49). Miln basically agreed with this view by saying that the apostles were of such an opinion (50). There is a touch of Arianism

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<sup>7</sup> An affidavit, *Lady Hewley's charities. The third act of the Controversy pending in the high Court of Chancery*, London: Green 1837, p. 113; more strongly, "by his avowed departure from doctrinal orthodoxy, [Miln] ceased to be recognized as a brother by the [ministers of any denomination for some years previous to his death]," p. 126.

in this description, but it could also be interpreted in a very traditional, trinitarian fashion. What is interesting in this context, is Miln's idea of death.

Death should not be feared by good people, since it is the way of reaching immortality. But the problem of describing the intermediate state, the state between death and resurrection, forced Miln's hand to speak about the nature of the human being. In humans, the individuality of a person consists of a single unity of the body and soul, that is restored at the resurrection. The fact the body cannot say that it has no need of the soul and *vice versa* (121) would indicate that the body and soul are inseparable, two sides of the same existential coin, so to speak. Time is measured by a succession of ideas, and thus, there are no ideas when there are no organs through which they operate, and thus, there is no time in the state of death (122); no time because time does not relate to the soul, the soul which persists without the body in the intermediate period, before the second coming of Christ? Not quite, but why not? The reader does not learn it from the *Lectures* where only a casual footnote can be found which refers the reader to Edmund Law (1703–1787), bishop of Carlisle, by whom the concept of death “is delineated in a very clear and judicious manner” (123). Living in the same city, Miln quite possibly had known Law personally and Miln's co-religionists may have known right away the meaning of this footnote. As it turns out, according to Law, nowhere does soul or spirit signify “a purely immaterial Principle in Man, or a *Substance* ... wholly separable from and independent of the Body.”<sup>8</sup> Law approvingly quoted a letter sent to him by John Taylor (1694–1761), the author of *A scheme of Scripture-divinity*, which reads that “no man can prove from Scriptures, that the Human Soul is a Principle, which lives, and acts, or thinks independent of the Body.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, in front of his congregation Miln was more open about the mind-body problem when he stated that the belief in a separate spirit entering after death into an intermediate state is “the leaven of human doctrine”; a correct doctrine is that the death destroys a person and “consigns him over to a state of rest and inaction, till his Saviour shall raise him to life, – once more reunite his soul and body” Miln, *The blessedness*, p. 6. Apparently, all Miln's expressions that refer to the soul or the spirit are just that, expressions used the way they would be frequently used today: in spite of its name, today's mainstream psychology does not consider the mind (never mind the soul or the spirit) as an entity existing independently of the body. To put it crudely, the mind is an excretion of the body – and it is quite clear that Miln, an ecclesiastic, adopted this purely materialist view. And thus, when the Biblical account speaks about breathing the soul into Adam at the moment of creation, this should be understood to mean endowing him with animal and rational life so he became a living soul (51) or a living being. Also, the image of God in Adam is only “the superior dignity of man above all other creatures” (54). Adam was in a trance when Eve was created, and apparently she was not from his side/rib, but the way he was created, and the expression that she was bone from his bone only indicates “the greatest resemblance possible in the power of the body and mind” between them (56).

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Law, *Considerations on the theory of religion*, Cambridge: J. Bentham 1755<sup>3</sup> [1745], p. 367. The statement was made in a long appendix added to the third edition of the *Considerations*.

<sup>9</sup> Law, *Considerations*, p. 401.



Is this materialism carried over to theology? What is the dual nature of Christ, then? When Christ became flesh, was He a purely corporeal being? How about God Himself? We could agree with Miln that humans cannot know the nature of God (278),<sup>10</sup> but can it be said that God is an incorporeal being? The attributes Miln ascribed to God, and only to God, would indicate it: omniscience (221) signifying an infinite wisdom (314), omnipotence, unlimited goodness (64, 264), perfection (115), and immortality (195).<sup>11</sup> So, it would appear that an immaterial substance, the substance of God, would exist in Miln's worldview. How about angels, good or bad, which are frequently mentioned by Miln? Angels are superior beings (115), beings of a higher rank than humans (137), "celestial beings [that] minister to our benefit in this life" (48). They have intuitive knowledge (8), however, their rational faculties are limited since knowing the essence or substance of anything is beyond the capacity of angels (81). So, if they are spiritual, that is, immaterial beings, spirits could exist independently of the body, therefore, why deny such an ability to the human spirit? If angels are not incorporeal, they are some kind of material bodies. Maybe immaterial nature is limited to God alone and all of His creation, by the fact this it is creation, is material, although this materiality has many levels. This again, would lead to the problem of the ontological status of Christ, before and after His incarnation. But Miln is silent about it.

## THE LECTURES

The *Lectures*, Miln's main work, shows him as knowledgeable in the science of his days and willing to have his own input, at least in its speculative aspect. He aimed his work at a general audience, adapting his presentation to „the capacities of ordinary readers" (vi). He planned the second edition, since there were more subscribers than the number of printed copies (xxv), by which we should understand the second printing. He did plan the second edition from which some "less entertaining and edifying" parts would be dropped and some added: the Mosaic history from the flood to the dispersion under Noah; and a chapter on the millennial reign of Christ<sup>12</sup>. He planned the second volume of *Lectures* on the history since the flood to the arrival of Israelites to Canaan (vi). He also planned a new book, soon to be published, *An essay upon the unity of and the varieties among the human species*<sup>13</sup>, however, all these plans did not materialize, very likely because he did not manage to finish his work before his death.

The *Lectures* did not get much traction. One reason may have been Miln's departure from Christian orthodoxy. Although unitarian views were not uncommon at that

<sup>10</sup> Miln, *National*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> And thus: when the souls is said to be immortal because it is not compound, "*the natural immortality of the soul*, is a phrase which would have sounded harshly in the ears of an apostle of Christ" (195).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Miln, *The rise and fatal effects of war: a discourse delivered on March 28, 1794; being the day appointed for a general fast*, Carlisle: W. Thompson 1794, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Miln, *National*, p. 32.

time in Britain (consider Newton), unitarian views were not quite advertised. Also, Miln's combative character may not have endeared him to potential readers. For example, he blasted theologians who took some expressions of the apostle Paul literally, such as "a new creation", or "being born again", resulting in "extravagant doctrines" (53). As to the consequences of the fall for mankind, "some men indulging their piety at the expence of their understanding, and others with a view to promote the interests of superstition and priestcraft, have fabricated doctrines upon this subject, repugnant to the first principles of reason, and derogatory to the character of the righteous governor of the world"; they understood metaphorical expressions literally (189). Some interpretations are, in his view, simply "pious reveries, rather than rational conjectures" (161). Apparently, others did not realize the way Miln did that the Scripture uses the style "suited to the common apprehension of thing," not to lecture about some "abstruse points of philosophy"; these points must be investigated by reason, they provide "the knowledge of the one true God, and those duties which we owe to him," the knowledge that surpasses reason (66). And yet, although Miln criticized their for others literal interpretations, the Biblical account of the fall is not, in his view, an allegory, and it should be treated quite literally; otherwise, "we can have no security in sacred writing, and must often be at a loss to judge, whether we are reading real history or an Eastern fable" (133). No general criterion was provided when literal interpretation is reasonable and when it is twisted by an exaggerated piety.

A partisan of an unorthodox theology that he was, Miln joined other Christian clergy in his misgivings of his age. This was an age more enlightened than any age before, and yet, as he saw it, light when abused is worse than darkness. Human knowledge, instead of teaching people of their physical and mental limitations, increased their pride of relying on their reason alone in their life. And so, many devoted their learning to undermine the validity of the Scriptures and try to replace revealed religion with natural religion; but the laws of justice and truth can only be found in the gospel of Christ.<sup>14</sup> Miln ardently advocated Christian ethics, among others, in his strong opposition to the war waged at that time with France since war is ruinous and contrary to the spirit of Christ<sup>15</sup> and "among all the crimes that can be charged to the corruption of human nature, the most atrocious, and at the same time the most unnatural, is War."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, as he strongly believed in the loving presence of God in the world, he also believed that due to God's providence, the greatest calamities that ever happened led to "the happiest and most salutary consequences to succeeding generations" (22). It appears that his interest in physico-theology and in sacred physics was motivated by this sentiment, as the physical history of the earth and the history of its inhabitants pointed not only to the existence of God, but also to the loving presence of His guiding hand to actualize happiness, the divine goal, for which all things were created (90), and for which humans were brought into existence (59). All in all, the moral message was most important, notwithstanding the controversial aspects of his ontology and theology.

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<sup>14</sup> Miln, *National*, pp. 27–28.

<sup>15</sup> Miln, *The rise*, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Miln, *National*, p. 15.



**PHYSICO-THEOLOGICAL LECTURES OF ROBERT MILN**

## SUMMARY

Robert Miln/Milne was an eighteenth century ecclesiastic, who wrote about physico-theology and sacred physics with an attempt of his own contribution in the latter. He was considered by his contemporaries to be of a unitarian leaning, and many places in his publications seem to confirm this. However, of primary importance to him was the moral message he wanted to provide.

**PHYSIKO-THEOLOGISCHE VORLESUNGEN VON ROBERT MILN**

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Robert Miln/Milne war ein Geistlicher des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts, der über Physiko-Theologie und heilige Physik schrieb, wobei er versuchte, in letzterem einen eigenen Beitrag zu leisten. Er wurde von seinen Zeitgenossen als Unitarier angesehen, und viele Stellen in seinen Veröffentlichungen scheinen dies zu bestätigen. Die moralische Botschaft, die er vermitteln wollte, war ihm jedoch von größter Bedeutung.

**WYKŁADY FIZYKO-TEOLOGICZNE ROBERTA MILN**

## STRESZCZENIE

Robert Miln/Milne był osiemnastowiecznym duchownym, który pisał na temat fizyko-teologii i fizyki sakralnej z próbą własnego wkładu w tę ostatnią. Był uważany przez współczesnych za zwolennika unitarianizmu i wiele miejsc w jego publikacjach zdaje się to potwierdzać. Jednak przesłanie moralne, które chciał przekazać, było dla niego najważniejsze.

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