

The God of Science: An Introduction to Scientific Theology by Alister E. McGrath. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004. Pp 271. \$ 25.00

In this theologically stimulating and highly readable book, Alister McGrath sketches out his case for a scientific theology which is more fully developed in his already published three-volume work *A Scientific Theology*. Scientific theology is McGrath's unique project intended to contribute to a 'public' theology that can effectively dialogue with the natural sciences "on its own terms," which he envisions as "encouraging public debate and dialogue" (13). This position, McGrath is quick to point out, is faithful to and governed by the Scriptures at all points. The distinctiveness of his scientific theology is, in large part, shaped by two basic elements. The first is his insistence that nature must be viewed in a distinctively Christian way, namely as creation. This is in contradistinction to viewing it as nature in the sense it is an independent entity. The second is his commitment to critical realism (as understood by Roy Bhasker) in contradistinction to naïve realism.

The purpose of this book is to provide an introduction to the main themes and application to theological method of scientific theology in a non-academic style for those without particular theological and philosophical training. The thesis is that although there is one reality there are multiple approaches to reality because reality is stratified (a view detailed by Roy Bhasker). This contradicts the epistemological insistence of the Enlightenment that "there was one single, universal set of criteria by which all beliefs could be established and confirmed" (105).

Each of the three main chapter titles corresponds to one of the previously published three-volume work -- *Nature, Reality, and Theory* respectively. In addition, there is an opening chapter titled *Prolegomena* in which McGrath introduces some of the major themes of scientific theology as well as explains something of his methodological approach and philosophical commitments. Ontologically, he assumes a realist perspective, although epistemologically he adheres to critical realism rather than classical foundationalism (fostering naïve realism). This results in what might be characterized as a position of confident epistemological humility.

Chapter 2 contains an insightful examination of the issues and difficulties surrounding how to talk about nature. For McGrath, it is a grave mistake for the Christian to speak of 'nature,' for the proper way to talk about nature is to speak of it as creation. In this way, one can accept natural theology as it is inextricably bound to the idea that nature is the creation of God and as such is revelation. According to McGrath, "Without this insight, there is no way in which *nature* can lead to a *theology*. A viable 'natural theology' thus rests upon foundations which themselves lie beyond the scope of such a natural theology---namely, the insight that the natural order and the human mind that reflects upon it are shaped by the divine *logos*" (74). At a time when natural theology has fallen upon hard times, McGrath retrieves it for good purposes in his scientific theology. If this world is the creation of God, then "there is an ontological ground for a theological engagement with the natural sciences" (21).

Although each chapter is rewarding, chapter 3 is arguably the most enlightening of the four chapters. In this chapter, he argues persuasively that epistemology is grounded in ontology and not the other way around. As McGrath points out: “To set up a principle that is of decisive importance throughout this project: ontology (the way things are) determines epistemology (the way things are known)” (107).

In chapter 4, McGrath treats the reader to a discerning discussion of the idea of “theory”. Confessing theories are necessary in both natural science and theology, he suggests that theory in the best sense (a faithful response to reality) in theology is the same as doctrine and dogma properly understood. It is in this chapter that a concern arises regarding McGrath’s position on universals and particulars. It seems at first he denies universals as an *a priori* category, leading one to think that his scientific theology project abandons the idea of any epistemological closure. However, he later clarifies by an illustration which mitigates immediate concerns. He writes, “For example, the Council of Chalcedon may be said to have secured ‘closure’ of the Christological debate at one level, while directing it into fresh channels on the other (187).” However, he is right when he affirms the necessary themes of the Christian faith and then suggests that they could be stated “more graciously and humbly” (190). This is indicative of his epistemological humility and not his disregard for necessary truths.

This is a remarkable book in every respect. McGrath’s commitment to critical thinking and priority of ontology when doing theology is immensely

refreshing. The convergence of his intellectual rigor, historical range, and theological acumen delivers a compelling case for his scientific theology as a methodology. Each chapter confronts the reader with a tone of humility as well as a strong sense that doing theology is of the utmost importance. This sense of the gravity in doing theology publicly is best captured when McGrath warns: “God will hold the theologian accountable for the manner in which God’s character and nature are rendered” (154).

Although McGrath’s scientific theology is unique, it is not without support from other thinkers. One is constantly confronted with the interaction of the ideas of such notables as Thomas Torrance, Karl Barth, Alastair MacIntyre, Michael Polanyi, John Polkinghorn, and Roy Bhasker. All of this assures the reader that McGrath does not do his theology in a closet. One can only hope that this volume will encourage the serious and theologically brave to give further consideration to McGrath’s scientific theology project as detailed in his trilogy.

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