

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 35 | Number 3

Article 6

---

March 2007

## Science & Grace: God's Reign in the Natural Sciences (Book Review)

Arnold E. Sikkema

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sikkema, Arnold E. (2007) "Science & Grace: God's Reign in the Natural Sciences (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 35: No. 3, 42 - 43.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol35/iss3/6](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol35/iss3/6)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

Morris, Tim, and Don Petcher. *Science & Grace: God's Reign in the Natural Sciences*. Wheaton Illinois: Crossway Books, 2006. 352pp. ISBN 978-1-58134-549-0. Reviewed by Arnold E. Sikkema, Associate Professor of Physics, Trinity Western University, British Columbia, Canada.

In teaching Christian perspectives in the natural sciences, and to some degree in any other discipline, one feels a significant tension. On the one hand, it is tempting to present simplistically and triumphalistically the view that the discipline is wholly founded upon a biblical worldview and only makes sense to Christians. On the other hand, we might elect to leave out theologically reflective commentary altogether because the requisite nuancing is either too complicated or appears unorthodox. Following either option fails to prepare students for the wider marketplace of ideas they will encounter in graduate school, the workplace, and culture in general. Many books on science and Christianity (or religion generally) have been generated in recent years, but Covenant College biologist Tim Morris and physicist Don Petcher have succeeded in producing “a one-volume source that addresses issues [in science and Christianity] in a way that speaks both to the evangelical mind-set and also to the subtlety of the issues involved without compromising what we hold to be fundamental theological truths” (vii).

Each of the book's three sections—“Science and Christian Belief in the Postmodern Context,” “Jesus Christ, the Lord of Creation,” and “Investigating His Dominion”—consists of three to five essay chapters, which can be read fruitfully, both on their own and in sequence. Morris and Petcher begin with a review and critique of modernism, which continues to boast a significant following in the public understanding of science. Modernism's metaphor of distinct trees of scientific and theological knowledge comes in a number of varieties: the trees intertwine, or one is dominant, or they are unrelated, or one is to be grafted into the other. Both post-modernism and a Christian worldview have already recognized the failure of this metaphor, since instead of standing on the forest floor, everyone is already sitting in the branches. As a result, Morris and Petcher propose to replace this picture of science and religion with a river metaphor. In their view, science is “the flow of a complex cultural enterprise that arises from a confluence of various historical, cultural, and philosophical brooks and streams, each grown out of its own foundational religious commitments” (11). The reality of the world, by God's grace, provides the constraining influence on science that allows common work to be done (just as the landscape constrains the river's flow); and the diverging delta reveals differing perspectives on what is found. This innovative river metaphor can be fruitful in addressing our culture in which “science...is simultaneously revered, feared, and reviled” (7).

This example from early in the book is one of several areas in which the authors not only insightfully identify but also correct modernist habits of mind. In doing so, they

recount the story of three early Christian dissenters of the Enlightenment, namely seventeenth-century scientist-philosopher Blaise Pascal, eighteenth-century Lutheran philosopher Johann Georg Hamann, and nineteenth-century Princeton Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge and their respective critiques of Descartes, Kant, and Darwin. They then turn to a concise and accessible summary of the contributions of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd to the Christian philosophy of science, showing both their continuity with earlier thinkers and their novelty.

Much written in the area of science and Christianity turns out to be simply theistic, or worse, deistic. Morris and Petcher's book is an excellent example of the riches to be mined from a fully Trinitarian perspective. They suggest that Calvin's minimal discussion of the Trinity in creation has tended to de-emphasize God's immanent and personal presence in the creation. Fully treating both the transcendence and immanence of God is important, and they rightly advance the significant contributions of the prominent twentieth-century, scientifically informed, Reformed theologians Thomas Torrance and Colin Gunton, whom I have also found helpful in their Trinitarian approach. This they do by unpacking the activity of Father, Son, and Spirit in creation and providence, especially considered covenantally and in cosmic redemption. Drawing on the work of Reformed theologian Meredith Kline, they show that already in Genesis 1, “the covenant relationship God establishes with His people...flows naturally out of His Trinitarian involvement with His creation” (99).

The authors' desire to challenge deeply-held habits of thought is nowhere more clear than in chapter 5, which is given the creatively chiasmic title “Supernatural Laws and Natural Miracles.” Here they trace the history of the concept of natural laws and the shift toward seeing the universe as mechanism. They conclude that instead of “pitting God's sovereignty against nature's freedom...[.] God is fully operative, and also creation is fully operative in all that occurs.” (131) However, their struggle against the notion of the ontological status of natural laws is not complete; vestiges of the mechanical world-picture remain in their formulation: “laws of nature God has placed *in* His creation” (132) and “God...is above all *created* laws” (128) (emphases mine).

The book is also a significant contribution to the discussion of the motivations and responsibilities of the Christian in science, valuable for students as well as for those deeply into their field. It helps those of us who are investigating God's dominion to reflect on how “to love God in all our being, all our knowing, and all our doing in the natural sciences” (156). They give sound advice on issues such as scientific and ecclesiastical authority and responsibility. Upon seeing how science fits into

the creation-fall-redemption-consummation story, they propose the “glorious scientific task in the kingdom [as] a science that has an integrally transforming character as aspects of creation are brought into explicit relation to the Christian scientist himself and thus are connected through him to the transformation of all things that has come and will come in Christ” (186). This is portrayed not simply as an unattainable platitude but with many concrete suggestions and examples that are both challenging and enriching. They show, for example, that Adam’s naming of the animals entails both “the receiving of order as divinely given and the constructing of order as a divinely appointed task” (214); in fact, this way of explaining “order” occurs as a theme in the book, so much so that I had to add pages 216, 224, 241 to the index entry for “order as given”/ “order as task.”

The term “grace” is also well and widely used in this book, as in the following contexts. It is God’s grace that the reality of creation constrains and allows for scientific theories to agree across worldviews. By God’s grace, we can confidently strike out into an exploration of our Father’s world without fear. God graciously reveals to us both Himself and the wonders and workings of the world. Even though the authors affirm “Common grace” as a theme early in the book (in connection with Kuyper), they distance themselves from that terminology near the end because of controversies in Dutch Reformed circles.

This dichotomy in the use of the term “common grace” may be attributed to the book’s dual authorship, which occasionally left me wondering whether this or that chapter was written by Morris or Petcher. In fact, while mostly speaking in the first person plural, the authors speak in the singular in a number of instances. While the preface warns the reader that there will be different styles and some redundancy because of co-authorship, some more careful editing would have avoided such

awkwardness. I do acknowledge the value of their style(s) in that a good number of chapters can be quite fruitfully read independently of the others.

As a physicist concerned with the study of the physical aspect of creation (defined in terms of its kernel, interaction), I was disappointed with their use of the word “physical” as denoting something that is “material” or “natural,” as opposed to “spiritual.” While the unpacking of Dooyeweerd’s modal aspects is not in the scope of this book, the insights gained from the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea highlight the reductionism of referring to biotic life and processes as physical, as they do in at least two cases: “the Spirit is not only the giver of spiritual life but also of physical life” (107) and “a physical process, like a plant developing from seed” (198). Furthermore, my interest as a physicist was piqued at several points to see how they might discuss issues such as randomness and uncertainty in quantum mechanics, but only the surface was scratched; perhaps a subsequent book will unpack the implications of their approach, which rightly remained generally applicable rather than discipline-specific.

*Science and Grace* is highly recommended for anyone teaching or learning science in a Christian context, for Christians working in science, and for those interested in a thoughtful and balanced alternative to perennial controversies. The book is based upon a theologically and philosophically Reformed foundation, thoroughly informed by Scripture, with suitably lengthy quotations and discussion, and well researched. Their treatment of scholarship and vocation will be valuable to those in other fields as well. In fact, in many respects I think the book could have been aptly titled *Scholarship and Grace*, for even outside of the so-called natural sciences, many of its themes apply as the multi-faceted creation is explored to the glory of its Triune Creator.

Milton, Anthony, ed. *The British Delegation to the Synod of Dort*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, England / Rochester, NY, USA: The Boydell Press and Church of England Record Society, 2005. 411 pp. ISBN: 1-84383-157-0. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History at Dordt College.

“There I bid John Calvin good-night.” This, we are told, by his editor Anthony Farindon (1598-1658), was the response of “the ever memorable” John Hales (1584-1656) to the Synod of Dort (1618-1619). Although Hales was not a delegate to the Synod (he was chaplain to the English ambassador in The Hague), the oft-misunderstood quip is in many books partly because generations of historians have found it too good to resist. The wide currency of the quotation can also be attributed to Hales’ *Golden Remains* (1659, enlarged 1673) being, for many years, one of the few accessible sources on the English and Scottish presence at the Synod.

As the writings of A. W. Harrison (*The Beginnings of*

*Arminianism* 1926; *Arminianism*, 1937) exemplify, the Synod did not come to enjoy a high reputation in England. The fact that it did not is partly explained by the massive impact of Wesleyan Methodism in the eighteenth century and the later tendency of Evangelicalism towards a careless, unexamined Arminianism. Even at the time, the Synod was not free from its association with the highly questionable execution of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547-1619), leader of the United Netherlands following the assassination of William of Orange.

Moreover, there was already a tendency within the Church of England to extrapolate the counter-reformational implications of the writings of the “judicious” Richard