
Pro Rege

Volume 30 | Number 4

Article 5

June 2002

Reply

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Recommended Citation

Pearcey, Nancy (2002) "Reply," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 30: No. 4, 20 - 22.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol30/iss4/5

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A Reply

—A REPLY BY NANCY PEARCEY

I would like to express gratitude to all three respondents for raising provocative and important points. I will reply, however, only to Keith Sewell and Cal Jongsma. A common theme runs through both of their responses: Both counsel caution in analyzing the thought of figures in the history of science who claimed to be Christians. Their work is “far from free of ambiguity” (Sewell) and at times they might even “pursue intellectual goals at odds with a Christian view of reality” (Jongsma). Jongsma suggests that I have assessed the early modern scientists rather more “benignly and optimistically” than he would, and wonders whether that is because I think “the Dordt community leans too far the other way.”

It’s quite true that I want to be generous in acknowledging the impact of Christian faith on the western intellectual tradition. I also want contemporary Christians to reclaim our own heritage within science, by taking seriously the claim of many of the founders of modern science to be fellow believers. The reason is not to lean against the inclinations of “the Dordt community,” but rather to lean against the pressures of *secular* academia. Most students can go through four years of secular university, and even graduate school, without ever learning that many major historical figures were at least seeking to work within a Christian framework of thought. History books have secularized history so thoroughly that many students do not know about the Christian faith of Copernicus, Descartes, Newton, and many more.

It’s true that we must also be cautious in assessing the contributions of these historical figures. In many cases, they adopted terminology and concepts from secular philosophy that, in the end, proved intellectually compromising—despite their good intentions. As Jongsma notes, in *The Soul of Science* I was careful to point out this problem. Yet, even in recognizing the dangers and pitfalls, I suggest that we acknowledge whatever good intentions they did have, and reclaim the early modern scientists from the secularist historians. For all their intellectual failings, these scientists were still our brothers and sisters in the faith. Their work is still part of “our” history and heritage. Even in those cases where, in hindsight, we can identify secularizing tendencies, that does not in itself mean they were “really” closet agnostics, as history textbooks often suggest. It just means they were mistaken Christians.

Nor were the early modern scientists alone in the difficulties they faced. They were wrestling with the perennial problem of how to give philosophical expression to biblical faith: How do we use the language and concepts current in the philosophy of the day, and yet not be co-opted by it?

In the early centuries, from the church fathers through the Middle Ages, the philosophical language adopted by many Christian thinkers was Neo-Platonism—from Clement, Origen, and Augustine, through Boethius, John Scotus Erigena, and Bonaventure. Hindsight shows that many of them gave Neo-Platonism far too free a rein in their

systems of thought, to the point of compromising their understanding of certain biblical concepts. Yet few of them (if any) intended to be anything but orthodox Christians.¹

In the high Middle Ages, Aristotle's works were reintroduced into Europe through Muslim philosophers such as Averroes and Avicenna. This thought was a radically secular form of Aristotelianism that made Form (goal, purpose, telos) purely immanent and deterministic. As the Anglican philosopher J.V. Langmead Casserley explains, "The Aristotelian revival had put the Faith on the intellectual defensive in Europe for the first time since the collapse of the Western empire."² In the face of this challenge, Thomas Aquinas struggled heroically to "Christianize" the new philosophy, by eliminating some of its teachings (e.g., that the world is eternal) and by showing that the rest, rightly understood, was compatible with Christianity.

However, later scholastics did not succeed in holding Aquinas's synthesis together. They tended toward a grace/nature dualism, which gave "nature" an autonomy that led once again to naturalism and determinism. The Forms were seen as inherent and independent forces within the world, restricting the activity of God Himself.

In reaction against Aristotelian naturalism, many early modern scientists revived the atomism of Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius. (This was an age when people still felt they had to buttress their position with appeals to the ancients.) Those who crafted a mechanistic view of nature—Galileo, Boyle, Gassendi, and others—rejected Aristotelian Forms (goals, purposes) and argued that God Himself directly imposed his own goals and purposes upon formless, inert matter. As Jacques Roger notes, a major theme of the Reformers was God's omnipotence: "In the religious sphere this led to the doctrine of salvation preached by Martin Luther and John Calvin, according to which God was the only active power in human justification. For the physical world this meant that Nature had no power of her own, that matter was passive, inert, and incapable of moving or forming anything by itself. God . . . was the sole origin of motion and activity in nature."³

Yet in adopting concepts from Epicurean materialism, the mechanistic scientists could not contain the results within a biblical framework. As

Benjamin Wiker argues, in Epicurean atomism, everything is the result of the chance collation of particles; there are no Forms, and hence no design or purpose. The Christian mechanists maintained that God Himself, by his direct activity, imposed design and purpose on atoms moving by chance. But as Christian teachings lost ground among the European elites, they reverted to the earlier materialistic version of atomism, along with its moral implications. All Forms, whether in nature or in human nature (e.g., social institutions), were reduced to the result of natural forces acting by chance.⁴ We recognize this as the dominant view in science today, and indeed in academia generally.

The point of this brief summary is that Christians of every age have struggled with the same dilemma: how to make use of the philosophical resources of the age without being co-opted by it; or how to plunder the Egyptians without being seduced by their trinkets; or how to use the language of the people we are hoping to reach without compromising the distinctive biblical message. In every age, we can point to Christians who drew on philosophical language and concepts effectively—and we can also trace the way those concepts eventually reverted to earlier pagan or secular versions. Richard Popkin, in *The History of Scepticism From Erasmus to Spinoza*, shows that some sixteenth-century Christians even revived the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus (he terms it "Christian Pyrrhonism"), believing that only a radical rejection of Reason could protect the doctrine of Revelation.⁵ I believe these efforts were greatly mistaken (this strain of anti-intellectualism retains an influence even today), but it shows how widely Christians have cast in attempts to find philosophical resources to defend the faith.

The point is that in our secularized age, we cannot afford to define the main battlefield as philosophical disagreements among Christians. Even when we have to point out grievous philosophical errors, we should acknowledge any sincere and genuine Christian commitment. Even as we rigorously critique the ideas of various historical figures, we should embrace them as fellow believers. And we should recognize that their struggles are the same struggles we face today in giving philosophical and cultural expression to our faith. I am certain that we have our own intellectual blind spots,

where we are affected more than we realize by the common assumptions of our day.

Finally, I'd like to clarify one additional point raised by Sewell in his response. The historical consciousness that arose after the Reformation, as described by Peter Harrison, is not the "Baconianism" embraced by later American evangelicals. The latter is a fascinating topic in its own right and I hope to address it in my next book.⁶ But what Harrison is describing is the early emergence of a modern worldview from a medieval worldview. It can be understood only if we realize that the medieval mentality had virtually lost a sense of the historicity of biblical events.

Medieval theologians did not deny that biblical events were historically true. It's just that the historical dimension was not important to them. As Berndt Moeller⁷ explains, they put much more value on the typological, moral, allegorical, and analogical interpretations of Scripture. These "spiritual" senses of Scripture showed how God was at work not only in past history but, more importantly, in the lives of believers today.

And where God was most tangibly and directly at work, for the medieval believer, was in the sacraments. "What the Bible only reported, happened daily in the Mass," Moeller writes. The reconciliation of God and man took place again as the past event (Christ's death and resurrection) was actualized in the present on the altar. Indeed, for the people of the middle ages, this present actualization became the main focus, so that "the living contemplation of the Church and her possession of divine things . . . took the place of retrospective consideration of the past saving act." The result was a loss of historical consciousness: "medieval contemplation of a present God brought about a cyclical understanding of history, for which time lost its linear character, and was not movement but only repetition and continuation."⁸

Against the backdrop of this cyclical and ahistorical outlook, we can better appreciate the Reformation's recovery of historicity. For Luther, the historical events *were* spiritual: the events themselves were laden with spiritual meaning and import—without needing any additional layers of "spiritual" interpretation superimposed upon them. As Harrison points out, this recovery of interest in the historical events of Scripture was important in spurring an interest in history and science *per se*.

ENDNOTES

1. An accessible, popular-level summary of church history that emphasizes the impact of Neo-Platonism on various Christian thinkers is Tony Lane's *Exploring Christian Thought* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Nelson's Christian Cornerstone Series, 1984). Originally published as *Lion Book of Christian Thought* (Oxford, 1983).
2. J.V. Langmead Casserley, *The Christian in Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 81.
3. Jacques Roger, "The Mechanistic Conception of Life," in *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 279.
4. Benjamin Wiker, *Moral Darwinism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002, forthcoming).
5. Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism From Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
6. Two important resources on the subject are George Marsden's *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) and Theodore Dwight Bozeman's *Protestants in an Age of Science* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).
7. B. Moeller, "Scripture, Tradition, and Sacrament in the Middle Ages and in Luther," in *Holy Book and Holy Tradition*, ed. F. F. Bruce and E. G. Rupp (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), 113-135.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124, 126.