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Re-Vision: A New Look at the Relationship Between Science and Religion (Book Review)

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Re-Vision: A New Look at the Relationship Between Science and Religion (Book Review)

Abstract

Reviewed Title: *Re-Vision: A New Look at the Relationship Between Science and Religion* by Clifford Chalmers Cain. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2015. 164 pp. ISBN: 0761865462.

Keywords

book review, Clifford Chalmers Cain, Re-Vision, science, religion

Book Reviews

For anyone who wants to read an insightful and novel way of understanding the rise of naturalism in the English-speaking world, this book is invaluable. I highly recommend the book and encourage the reader to take its historical lessons to heart.

Reviewed by Arie Leegwater, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI 49546.



RELIGION & SCIENCE

RE-VISION: A New Look at the Relationship between Science and Religion by Clifford Chalmers Cain, ed. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2015. 164 pages. Paperback; \$29.99. ISBN: 0761865462.

As someone who has long been interested in the relationships between faith and science, I was intrigued when I saw that this book claimed to provide a “new look.” Sadly, not only is this “look” not new, but its depiction of God is not one with which I or many *PSCF* readers would be comfortable.

Written by various faculty members at Westminster College of Missouri, the format of the book is promising enough. Clifford Chalmers Cain is Professor of Religious Studies and the primary author of the book. Other chapters, written by colleagues in the sciences and philosophy at Westminster, deal with “hot button” issues in religion and science: the Big Bang, evolution, nature-nurture, and intelligent design (ID). Cain responds to each of these chapters, showing how in his view religion interacts with these issues.

Those familiar with the literature on religion-science interactions will know Ian Barbour’s four models: conflict, independence, interaction, and integration. Cain acknowledges Barbour but instead chooses the models of conflict, contrast, and conversation (p. 7). Cain rightly rejects the conflict model, which distorts the evidence and has plagued the study of religion-science interactions. Likewise, he points out the impossibility of the contrast model, which holds that religion and science are independent. He sees the most promise in conversation between religion and science, in which each can inform the other to advance potential mutual knowledge (p. 9). In omitting the integration model, Cain evidently sees science as free from worldview presuppositions. However, in his response chapters, Cain absorbs the naturalistic worldview espoused by these authors and accommodates it into his theology. Cain holds to process theology, which denies God’s omnipotence and omniscience but argues that God acts by persuasion, not decree. Thus the conversation between religion and science seems more of a capitulation on the part of religion than a conversation, which Cain

acknowledges but sees as more of a correction than an acquiescence (p. 15).

The Big Bang implies a beginning and thus someone who began the process. In his discussion of this topic, Cain confuses God’s omnipotence with the speed of his action and sees the drawn-out process of creation as evidence for process theology (p. 38). Likewise, the anthropic principle is thought to be guided, not directed, by the God of process theology, even though the form of this guidance is not given.

One theological question raised by evolution is how the randomness of evolution relates to God’s providential hand. When the biologist McNett states, “It requires no supernatural guidance or great cosmic direction for its operation. It cares not a whit for our destiny, hopes, or salvation ...” (p. 57), he is making a theological statement, not a scientific one. Cain, in his response, affirms the doctrine of providence but cannot reconcile an omnipotent God with the naturalistic processes of evolution or with human freedom (78 ff.). Instead, he again invokes the impotent God of process theology. By contrast, I would argue that God’s omnipotence is maintained in the doctrine of concurrence, which holds that God is acting directly (God’s omnipotence) and we are acting (our freedom).

In his response to the chapter on the nature-nurture question, Cain rightly criticizes genetic determinism and acknowledges the role of environmental influences that shape who we are. Cain asserts that the failure of genetic determinism gives room for the human freedom that is necessary for religion’s standard of morality (p. 116). Maybe so, but what then does account for human freedom? When we are converted and transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2), do these changes come about by our actions or God’s?

In the chapter on ID, the philosopher Geenen’s claim (equating ID with creationism) that ID attempts “to make room for God’s causal role in the physical and biological world” (p. 140) is a questionable statement. One could claim that God created the world solely through natural processes, but Geenen rejects any causality by God. Does this also exclude the persuasive God of process theology? Moreover, if the God of the Bible performed miracles in redemptive history, what about miracles in creative history? Cain rejects that the intelligent designer could be God because such a god would be a dictator, not the winsome God of his process theology.

All of this leads me to question the validity of process theology. Cain argues (p. 147) that an omnipotent

God cannot also be the empathetic God as portrayed in the Bible: “God wants/intends certain things but God does not guarantee—cannot guarantee—that those things will come to be.” But empathy does not mean impotence. Christ willingly subjected himself to death; this does not mean that he was not in control. Moreover, if the God of process theology is merely persuasive and not directive, how is God so without being superfluous? If God is truly benevolent, wouldn’t that benevolence be undermined by his ineffectiveness in carrying out his will?

Although the scientific arguments are clearly presented, the book is not without factual errors. In his chapter on intelligent design, Geenen argues against Behe’s irreducible complexity theory by providing evidence that the auditory ossicles and the panda’s thumb are not irreducibly complex (p. 134). But Behe never argues that they are; he limited his examples to molecular systems.

In summary, while Cain has raised some interesting arguments about the relationship between religion and science, I find them unconvincing. Science is not done in a theological vacuum and process theology’s accommodation to the materialist worldview espoused in the chapters on science is unsatisfying.

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FOR THE LOVE OF ALL CREATURES: The Story of Grace in Genesis by William Greenway. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015. 178 pages. Paperback; \$18.00. ISBN: 9780802872913.

This creative study is timely in light of contemporary environmental challenges, and one of its principal findings—that God created humanity to be good stewards of the earth, “caretakers of God’s garden” (p. 84)—is most welcome owing to the general neglect of this issue in theological discourses. What William Greenway offers is a reading of Genesis that is overtly creature and creation loving in its approach (pp. xiii, 93–94, 100–105, 110, 143–44). He insists throughout that Genesis is a spiritual classic and that readers ought to approach it as such. Materialist interpretations that assume its authors attempt a primitive “scientific” account of origins are uniformly guilty of “genre confusion” (p. 8).

The problem with materialist readings, whether those of neo-atheism or biblical literalism, is the tendency to leap from science to metaphysics. Scientists who insist that evolutionary theory disproves the Bible and vindicates atheism are as guilty of this as are fundamentalists who find “proofs” for the existence of God in the same writings. Greenway’s elegantly

argued alternative insists one can accept both evolution and other scientific insights while maintaining that Genesis is true. The problem is not science but materialism (pp. 32, 107, etc.) and in response, he sets about rescuing the religious poetry and spiritual meditations that are the creation and flood narratives from misguided reading strategies. The biblical primeval history may not correspond to contemporary scientific understandings but it does present us with glimpses of a profound grace and beauty in the midst of a world suffused with injustice, cruelty, and suffering (p. 140).

Greenway contrasts Genesis 1–11 with two very different texts. The first is the ancient *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian origin narrative that was the primary alternative to the one put forward by the authors of Genesis. The second is the comparatively modern creation narrative in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (published 1651), which, in combination with Darwinian-style materialism, “constitutes the predominant modern Western understanding of the ultimate character of reality” (p. 17). Hobbes and twenty-first-century materialists alike view existence as “wholly physical, a blind interplay of forces” (p. 34). Whereas the *Enuma Elish* was the most important competing origin story in the ancient world, *Leviathan* outlines “the basic parameters of the modern Western Hobbesian/Darwinian creation narrative” (p. 29), and is the creation narrative of materialism (p. 30). What Hobbes seeks is a rationale for commonwealths consistent with modernity’s discovery of the materialist character of reality, a worldview that insists that human self-interest rules out the existence of true altruism. There is no god, no love, no good and evil. It is a vision of reality Greenway finds “dark and depressing” (p. 45; cf. p. 41) but one that dominates Western thought in its updated neo-Darwinian form.

The alternative is the message of grace found in the Genesis creation and flood myths. Here Greenway finds a basis to question and dismantle the deeply rooted anthropocentrism of the Western world that “has plagued readings of these texts for two millennia” (p. 16; see, too, pp. 101–103), and resources for a spiritual orientation that affirms the goodness of all life. In the process, he confronts ethical questions rarely asked in theological circles. To give but one example, his provocative discussion of animal sacrifice confronts the tendency to devalue nonhuman life so typical in the anthropocentric West. Greenway recognizes competing attitudes toward blood sacrifice in ancient Israelite society (pp. 59–63, 78, etc.) but adds that despite rival views on the matter, biblical authors uniformly present a high regard for all living things. The modern Western option that assumes an