
Pro Rege

Volume 20 | Number 4

Article 3

June 1992

Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures, Volume I (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Goheen, Michael W. (1992) "Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures, Volume I (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 20: No. 4, 25 - 26.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol20/iss4/3

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Book Reviews

Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures, Volume I, by Ian Barbour (New York: Harper and Row, 1990). Cloth and paperback. \$29.95 and \$16.95. 297 pages. Reviewed by Mike Goheen, Instructor of Theology.

A number of years ago, as I was becoming interested in the relationship between the natural sciences and theology, I asked someone where I should begin reading. I was pointed to Ian Barbour's *Issues in Science and Religion* as a good introduction to the topic. I was not disappointed. This book was a lucid and comprehensive introduction to the whole area of the interaction between science and faith. *Issues in Science and Religion* was published in 1966, and it remains a classic.

In the present volume, *Religion in an Age of Science*, Barbour writes an updated sequel to that book. This book is the first of two volumes based on lectures given in 1989 in Scotland for the distinguished Gifford Lecture series. Few scholars have gained the depth and breadth in the area of science and religion that Barbour has. He has been a participant and pioneer in this area for more than three decades. This book will undoubtedly play an important role in the ongoing dialogue between theology and science.

There are three main sections in *Religion in an Age of Science*. In part one, entitled "Religion and the Methods of Science," Barbour provides a typology of the relation between science and religion and discusses contemporary scholarship in the area of philosophy of science. It is fitting that Barbour should begin here since, in the 20th century, the main influences of science on religion have come less from specific theories—such as quantum physics, relativity, molecular biology—than from views of science as a method. In part two, entitled "Religion and the Theories of Science," Barbour deals with current research in physics, astronomy, and biology and its theological implications. In a final section, entitled "Philosophical and Theological Reflections," he deals with human nature, process thought, and the relationship of God to the world in a more detailed fashion. Throughout he seeks to draw out the implications of modern insights in these areas for theology. Barbour has mastered and summarized an immense amount of material and communicates his ideas in a lucid and understandable way.

Epistemologically, Barbour opts for a critical realist position somewhere between classical realism and instrumentalism. In classical realism, scientific models

and theories are taken as literal descriptions of the world. In instrumentalism, models and theories are simply calculating devices, heuristic fictions that do not refer to real entities in the world but enable the scientist to correlate and predict observations. Critical realism sees models and theories as abstract symbolic systems that selectively represent limited aspects of the world for specific purposes. Theologically and philosophically, Barbour finds process thought to be the most adequate system to deal with the dynamic, contingent, and evolutionary world portrayed by science.

A Christian in the Reformed tradition will have difficulty with numerous conclusions and formulations in this book. The first problem surfaces in the opening questions that set the agenda for this book: "What is the place of religion in an age of science? . . . What view of God is consistent with the scientific understanding of the world?" These questions reveal a standpoint that permeates the entire book and guides Barbour's approach to the problem. Barbour takes the scientific world view as normative. The modern scientific world view is taken as the plausibility structure for the entire discussion. One's task is then to find a place for faith and theology within the reigning scientific world view. This presupposition underlies Barbour's entire treatment. But it seems to me that this is backwards. The responsibility of the Christian is to attempt the much more difficult enterprise of trying to understand the place of modern science in the light of the Scriptures. It is the Biblical story that gives us a normative world view in which we must seek to understand the success and place of modern science.

Another basic problem is Barbour's understanding of religion. Barbour stands in the classic liberal theological tradition. The key word for Barbour is "experience." In an earlier book Barbour spoke of the need to return to the "experiential basis for religion" (*Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 8). In religion we are not dealing with the acts and words of God that are normative for faith, confession, theology, and the life of the church. Rather, we are dealing with human religious experiences that have interpreted events and the world in a religious way on the basis of cultural traditions. The experiential basis

for religion comes in the numinous *experience* of the holy, the mystical *experience* of unity, the transformative *experience* of reorientation, courage in facing suffering and death, the moral *experience* of obligation, and the *experience* of order and creativity in the world. The Bible is understood as a record of human experiences. It can claim no uniqueness or normative authority. It is simply another sacred book, alongside of others, that testifies to the religious dimension of human existence through myth and story. Confession testifies to one's religious experience, and theology systematically and critically reflects on this experience of the religious community. While Barbour does at one point speak of

revelation, it does not function in any authoritative or significant way in his treatment.

In spite of these objections *Religion in an Age of Science* can be read with profit by almost any serious student of the field. A person outside of the natural sciences, however, may find some of the discussion in biology, astronomy, and physics difficult reading. The book's greatest value lies in the fair and lucid way Barbour describes and analyzes many different positions. As a vital participant in the ongoing discussion of the relation between natural sciences and the Christian faith, he paints the landscape of current scholarship on many crucial issues.

Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America, 2nd ed., by Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 271 pages, paperback. Reviewed by Hubert Krygsman, Instructor of History.

The republication of this work, with only an afterword added to its 1986 version, indicates the durability of Noll's scholarship and the scarcity of comparable studies. The book remains an important survey of the historical development of twentieth century evangelical thought from its retreat into fundamentalism through its renaissance, during the post-war period, in neo-evangelical scholarship. In tracing this development Noll also lays claim to a tradition of evangelical critical scholarship. And in the final chapters of the book he moves from diagnosing the perils faced by that scholarship to proposing what he calls a "theology of criticism" for a more effective integration of faith and scholarship (9-10).

On the one hand, belief in the Bible as God's Word bound evangelicals to a "community of belief" committed to accepting the factual veracity of the Bible and to insistence on a supernatural God as the transcendent origin of the Bible and spiritual reality (7). On the other hand, it involved evangelicals in a community of scholarship, or of "intellectual neutrality," for the purpose of discovering the content of the Bible. As Noll notes, these loyalties also rested on the assumption, albeit unrecognized, of an inductive and realist, or Baconian, paradigm of scholarship.

By focusing on Biblical scholarship, Noll singles out a rather narrow strand of twentieth century evangelicalism. Though he is familiar with George Marsden's portrayal of evangelicalism as a broad historical movement rooted in the revivalist tradition, Noll's working definition identifies evangelicals as those holding a central "conservative" belief in the Bible as God's Word, understood "in a cognitive, propositional, factual sense," (8) and as coterminous with the authority of God. Such a definition, with the attendant emphasis on Biblical scholarship, inescapably bypasses groups like the Pentecostals who emphasize spiritual experience rather than Biblical scholarship, and who, as Donald Dayton points out, constitute the vast majority of the evangelical movement (see 204, fn 11). Noll's search for a tradition of evangelical scholarship is thus focused on what might be called the scholastic strand in evangelicalism, with which Noll is both familiar and frankly sympathetic.

It was out of these loyalties, Noll contends, that evangelicals cultivated a tradition of critical scholarship. Prior to 1900, evangelicals took up the challenge of contemporary historical scholarship and theory. While appropriating the "factual results" of historical scholarship, evangelicals also criticized the evolutionary and naturalist assumptions of many historical critics of the Bible. Thus they held forth their older inductive method, against the new Kantian paradigm, both as the proper model of objective scholarship and as consistent with the Bible and the primacy of spiritual reality and a supernatural God.

Noll treats evangelical belief in the Bible as giving rise to an inherent tension between "faith and criticism."

According to Noll this resulted, not in a conflict between paradigms within the scholarly community, but in a "clash between two traditional loyalties, to scientific scholarship as a neutral, objective inquiry, and to the Bible as the factually accurate Word of God" (25). In reaction to the growing prevalence of the Kantian paradigm and the ideal of specialized research, alienated evangelical scholars like J. Grescham Machen insisted on an uncompromising doctrine of plenary Biblical inerrancy and turned for support to the broader community of evangelical faith. In so doing they reinforced the revivalist emphasis on populist authority, turned their