
Pro Rege

Volume 45 | Number 3

Article 7

March 2017

Little Book for New Scientists (Book Review)

Carl P. Fictorie

Dordt College, carl.fictorie@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Fictorie, Carl P. (2017) "Little Book for New Scientists (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 45: No. 3, 33 - 36.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol45/iss3/7

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

renewal that would greatly enrich evangelical communities if they have ears to hear.

Sewell's work is also timely because of the great need for people in the Christian Reformed tradition to recover what is best about their own Kuyperian roots. It is distressing to see how many elements of evangelical syncretism are being incorporated into institutional bodies that were built on the very Dutch Reformed theological and philosophical foundations that Sewell argues are paths for renewal. How can the Christian Reformed tradition provide light to aid evangelicals with these issues when many of our own are abandoning first principles for a "grass is greener" incorporation of evangelical syncretism? Sewell's book serves as a jeremiad, calling not only evangelicals but also the heirs of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd to reject gospel reductionism in favor of the fulsome gospel revealed in reformation-

al approaches to biblical interpretation and cultural engagement.

Keith Sewell's *The Crisis of Evangelical Christianity* deserves the highest commendation and recommendation. It is thoroughly researched, well written, and cogently argued. Sewell demonstrates well his skills as a historian in his reconstruction and interpretation of the general historical currents of evangelicalism. Sewell also impresses the reader with his ability as a theologian and exegete of Scripture. His practical recommendations for a way forward reveal the concern and passion of a Christian scholar who has his ear to the ground. The book benefits from his years of practical experience as a churchman invested in fostering renewal in both the church and academy. It prompts conversations about important issues that need to continue and issues calls for action that should not be delayed.

A Little Book for New Scientists. Reeves, Josh A., and Steve Donaldson. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016. 142pp. ISBN: 978-0-8308-5144-7. Reviewed by Carl P. Fictorie, Professor of Chemistry, Dordt College.

As a chemistry professor in a Christian college, I am always interested in books that can help my students build connections between their Christian faith and their science knowledge. Thus, when *A Little Book for New Scientists* became available, it immediately demanded my attention. Its conversational style, short chapters, comprehensive scope, and extensive references will meet the new scientists where they are. At the same time, however, these features make for a text that lacks the depth and detail needed to provide a solid foundation upon which to build.

The purpose of the book is "to help Christians studying and practicing in the sciences to connect their vocation with their Christian faith" (13). Over nine chapters in three sections, Reeves and Donaldson encourage Christians in the sciences by making a case that it is certainly possible, and actually necessary, for scientists to live out their faith in their scientific activity.

As the title suggests, this is a short book of 142 pages, written in a conversational style, giving the feeling that the authors are serving as mentors to scientists early in their career. While this is not an

academic treatise, the authors include a large number of references and sources. Thus, the young scientist can use this book as the starting point for a deeper journey into understanding the relationship between Christianity and science.

The book is divided into three sections: "Why study science?" "Characteristics of Faithful Scientists," and "Science and Christian Faith." The young scientist does need to start with the introduction. The introduction, building a bridge of solidarity with the reader, opens with a sympathetic discussion of the many pressures on the scientist in a highly competitive and very critical profession. Additional pressure comes from the tension between Christian faith and scientific practice. The authors provide comfort by assuring the reader that Christian truths have little to fear from attacks by science, and that the scientist who engages in this discussion is "growing toward a fuller understanding of [God] (and his creation)" (15).

In the opening section, "Why Study Science," Reeves and Donaldson address three major themes: the "two books" metaphor as a helpful motif for relating scripture and nature, the triumphalist history

of modern science, and the ethical tensions that arise within the world of science for the Christian scientist.

In the context of the “two books” metaphor, which is that God’s truths are revealed in both the book of Scripture and the book of nature, the authors note that the study of nature does provide some knowledge of God’s wisdom. Because all truth is God’s truth, scientists need not fear what science discovers about creation. In this section, Reeves and Donaldson also stress the importance that interpretation takes in both scientific activity and scriptural study. Differences between scientific theories and Christian doctrine are a result of interpretation, not the result of problems with either nature or scripture. This last point is largely correct. What the authors don’t do at this point is to give useful tools to help the young scientist resolve these differences.

Then Reeves and Donaldson survey what they call the triumphalist history of science, wherein the development of modern science overcame the religious superstitions and dogmas of the past and became the primary tool for discerning truth. The authors rightfully critique this story, pointing out that, until recently, most scientists in the Western tradition were at least nominally Christian, that stories like that of the trial of Galileo are much more complex than the triumphalist story would suggest, and that the intellectual outcomes of the triumphalist story, scientism, and methodological naturalism are also faulty.

The critique of scientism closes with a telling sentence: “We should thus not put too much stock in the meta-theories that scientific naturalists tell us about the world and ourselves” (46). On the one hand, this is an important statement. Scientism has significant flaws, particularly for those who extrapolate it to an all-encompassing, reductionistic world-view. On the other hand, using the phrase “put too much stock” casts a dismissive tone, suggesting that scientism can be rejected uncritically, a tone of voice that occurs too often in the book. For a young Christian scientist, who is just starting to navigate the turbulent waters of faith-science issues, phrases like this can be intellectual shortcuts that undermine the critical reasoning needed to thoroughly evaluate and critique a dominant worldview such as scientism.

The authors’ main point in their discussion of ethics is that scientists are, on average, no more virtuous than the average person. However, because scientific communities train their own and have means of verifying results and expelling those who violate scientific practices, there are mechanisms to ensure that scientific results are of sufficient quality to be trustworthy. In the context of a discussion of values, the authors rightfully critique the fact/value distinction, the idea that the knowledge that science pursues is value-free, and the idea that the moral implications of science are only in how society uses scientifically-discovered knowledge. They correctly point out that there is no clear demarcation between fact and value, and that all scientific knowledge is grounded in a value system.

What the authors overlook is the role of sin in this context. Christians believe that all people, including scientists, are sinful, a belief that has substantial implications for science. The notable point that is overlooked is that virtuous behavior, or the lack thereof, is grounded in a fundamental brokenness in humanity. For the young Christian scientist, it is encouraging to hear that it is possible to be both a good Christian and a good scientist, but it is also important to hear how one can deal with the problem of sin in science and as a scientist.

In the second section of the book, the focus shifts toward specific characteristics of good scientists. In the fourth chapter, Reeves and Donaldson advise new scientists to be particularly cautious about their time because it is easy for their work to consume all of it. They remind the young scientist that her or his motivation comes from a greater source, the sense of vocation that comes from serving God, so that our hope is found in being a faithful child of the Creator.

In contrast to the popular picture of the scientist as a lone pioneer in the lab, the actual picture is quite different in that most research is done by teams. So there is a strong community aspect in science. In this context, the authors introduce Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm concept and Imre Lakatos’ research programs as the predominant theories of community-based research. The network of ideas and theories that make up a paradigm can bring tension to the Christian in those areas where certain theories conflict with Christian beliefs.

The authors rightfully encourage a humble approach to both scientific claims and theological beliefs. They write, “To acknowledge that one might be wrong, and to admit it when one is wrong, is the gateway to greater discovery. Thus the route to greater insight...begins with intellectual humility” (89). The path to a greater understanding of truth comes from recognizing that our understanding is imperfect.

In the last section of the book, Reeves and Donaldson address issues of particular note to the Christian scientist. Among the most contentious issues for the Christian is the relationship between science and Scripture. Building on their theme of humility, the authors provide a series of principles focusing on the importance of understanding that we interpret Scripture regardless of our view of its literal character or infallibility, that we gain our understanding of Scripture as part of a community of believers, and that Scripture was written in an historical context that we need to understand.

Among the common stereotypes of the modern scientist is that they are mostly atheists. The authors cite a survey of members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and observe that the membership has a higher percentage of atheists or agnostics than the general public. Yet, while scientists are more frequently non-Christian, this fact does not mean that all scientists are atheists or that all are hostile to Christianity.

The authors then suggest reasons for a disproportionately high number of non-Christians in the sciences. A high view of science can make one wonder why we need a God. Bad experiences with churches cause scientists to give up on their faith. Additionally, many Christian worldviews have a God that is too small for His own creation. Finally, the authors suggest that intellectual hubris can make God irrelevant. The authors seem to be willing here, and elsewhere, to repeatedly allow the debate to defer to the science. While there are tenets of doctrine and interpretation that are flexible and open to interpretation (e.g., the mechanism of creation and development of the universe), there are others that are not (e.g. that creation is created by a Creator). The authors provide little guidance to help sort this out.

A Little Book for New Scientists tries to cover a lot

in 142 pages. As the outline above shows, the book touches on a majority of the substantial issues. This is both a strength and weakness of the book.

It is a strength in that the young Christian scientist is made aware of the extent of the issues he or she will face in trying to balance faith and science. The book is likely to raise a lot of questions in the mind of the Christian scientist. As such, it has the potential to lead to a lot of good discussions between the young scientist and a mentor. But this expansive approach is also something of a weakness. The book’s references are great, but if each new paragraph or page raises a new question or area of concern, the young Christian scientist will have a bewildering number of questions to address and little structure by which to address them.

The book brings up numerous topics, but it tends to give relatively few clear answers about very many of them. A repeated theme is the importance of recognizing the role of assumptions in both science and religion. For example, they observe that the history of science often reflects “more the assumptions of those who tell [the stories] than the historical record” (35). Later when discussing the literal interpretation of Scripture, the authors note that “when considering a passage of Scripture, we cannot separate our cultural and theological assumptions from the interpretations we make” (99). Unfortunately, the authors do not provide much in the way of descriptions of their own assumptions. For example, in discussing the two books metaphor, they comment that “the metaphor...does not mean that they should be given equal weight in terms of importance....Indeed the central message of Christianity has remained the same despite dramatic changes in Western philosophies of nature....This is not to deny development in theological doctrine over church history, but to recognize that Christians today can affirm ‘Jesus is Lord’ just as their predecessors have done for almost two millennia” (29). It’s not at all clear what the phrase “Jesus is Lord” means to these authors or how it is the same or different from the meaning of two hundred years ago. In using the phrase, these writers provide a weak foundation.

Another concept, truth, is the most frequently noted entry in the subject index. Already in the introduction, the authors introduce the notions of

truth and the idea of science and religion as truth-seeking (13-16). The authors are careful in their description of the work of the scientist as the search for truth, noting that absolute truth is never achieved via the methods of science. Yet, they hold out truth as the ultimate goal of science (49). However, truth is a tricky notion, especially in a postmodern context. Sometimes the authors confuse truth with facts (99). At other times, truth is conflated with beliefs (97). Elsewhere, truth is the scientific theory that is no longer questioned (131). What is missing is the distinction between scientific theories as human constructs and the reality of a creation that behaves in a lawful manner. So a young Christian scientist could walk away from this reading, confused about what he or she should think about what truth is.

I think this book has value as an encouragement to a new scientist who is wondering if it is possible to be both a Christian and a scientist. It helps to raise a wealth of important issues that the Christian scientist needs to consider. The emphasis on community is valuable, especially with the advice to be humble in one's interactions. But it should not be viewed as a source for a solid foundation upon which to build a substantial understanding of how to be both a Christian and a scientist. The references will help, and if the new scientist has a mentor to help sort out the issues, this book can be a good starting point. In a sentence, this book is a good place to begin this intellectual and faith journey, but it should not be the place to finish it.

Perfume River. Butler, Robert Olen. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2016. 273pp. ISBN: 978-0-8021-2575-0. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Associate Professor of English, Dordt College.

The term “politics” no doubt means different things for different families. In my own extended family, you simply don't bring it up, don't even breathe a word like “election” for fear of what might happen. I know we're not alone. These days, when it comes to politics, family dissension seems pretty widespread. Whatever “politics” means in each of our family contexts, it's tempting to boil down the divides to some soundbite like, “We are more polarized than we have ever been in America.”

Except, of course, that's not true.

Among other things, Robert Olen Butler's latest novel, *Perfume River*, is a reminder that we didn't suddenly arrive at the political polarization that seems to define America right down to our immediate families. No, America has a proud history of brother divided against brother, and *Perfume River* is a kind of tracer on family polarization, extending back through the Vietnam War era.

Dredging up Vietnam is arguably a risky move for Butler. Vietnam predates many of us, including this reader, and for millennials, communism and Southeast Asia must seem like ancient history in an irrelevant geography. But Butler has always been one for imaginative risk—his 1992 National Book Award-winning *Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* employs all first-person Vietnamese nar-

rators—and he won't let us be that naïve: we have not invented polarization, and we can learn a thing or two by revisiting the last time many American families actually did split apart over politics and “American greatness.”

Perfume River follows multiple characters in the William Quinlan family, a family divided for over fifty years by the Vietnam conflict. Our primary insight into the story comes through the eyes of Robert Quinlan, a 70-year-old history prof at Florida State University and a Vietnam vet. Robert and his younger brother Jimmy are the only children of William Quinlan, a World War II vet whose ideas about war and patriotism are still firmly enshrined in his mind at 90 years old: for William, war is what defines your life. It's this attitude that drove Jimmy to the arms of the “Free Love” crowd and eventually to Canada, where, at the book's beginning, he remains cut off from the rest of the family. However, Robert, too, though closer in proximity to William, remains distant from him in ideals.

Butler's forte is taking us deeply into the minds of his characters, revealing each character's inner thoughts and even subconsciousness, and this is also the best feature of *Perfume River*. As we circle through the minds of both the Quinlan men and women (most notably Darla Quinlan, Robert's