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## Scientific Theology, Vol. I: Nature (Book Review)

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# Book Reviews

*A Scientific Theology, Vol. I: Nature*, by Alister E. McGrath (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). 325pp. Cloth \$40.00. ISBN 0-8028-3925-8. Reviewed by Roger D. Henderson, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Dordt College and Arnold E. Sikkema, Assistant Professor of Physics, Dordt College.

Alister McGrath is a prolific theologian clearly identifying with the Reformed tradition, who holds Oxford doctorates in molecular biophysics and in historical and systematic theology. He directed the CCCU-sponsored John Templeton Oxford Seminars on Science and Christianity during the summers of 1999-2001, and has now written the first of a trilogy—with volumes entitled *Nature, Reality, and Theory*—which argues that a “positive working relationship between Christian theology and the natural sciences is demanded by the Christian understanding of the nature of reality itself—an understanding which is grounded in the doctrine of creation” (21). This well-written systematic study, documented with many historic and recent sources, is marked with affirmations of “classical Christian formulations” (42) not common among writers in the recently booming field of “science and religion.”

Not surprisingly, at the center of this book is a discussion of the meaning of nature. Much of what McGrath says leads up to and follows from this discussion. What is nature? To what does the word refer? What do we mean by “natural”? Is “nature” things like rivers, forests, mountains, and wilderness areas? Or is it “the structures, processes and causal powers...within the physical world” (82)? While firmly interested in the intellectual history of the concept, the author also focuses on nature as what a natural scientist studies. Through the ages, he says, thinkers have conceived of and investigated “nature” in different ways. Furthermore, certain styles of scientific practice go hand in hand with certain attitudes toward what nature is.

After describing a number of otherwise scantily-examined popular notions of nature still prevalent today (e.g., nature as that which is untouched by man, as the basis of what ought and ought not to be, and as religious centerpiece), McGrath briefly considers the history of the concept. In early Greece there were a number of notions of nature associating it with any one or combinations of the “four elements.” These were followed by Plato’s view that the natural world was a product of the creative action of God who had purposefully and intelligently fashioned it. Aristotle, says McGrath, was the first to examine the concept of nature on a sustained basis. Nature, says Aristotle, “is everywhere a cause of order” (94) and it does nothing without a purpose. By extension, the “nature” of any particular thing is what “that entity is, and what it ought to do—where ‘ought’ bears the meaning of ‘do what is appropriate to its specific nature’” (94).

Next, McGrath discusses the views of the sixth-century Christian writer Philoponus. To him, nature is no longer merely an immanent principle in things but “a force—a life or power... a ‘trans-formal’ or ‘form-making’ activity...like an artisan forming and shaping his materials” (96). More than an account of what nature *does*, such as given by Aristotle, Philoponus offers an “account of what nature is” (96). The important point here, according to McGrath, is that the God-given ordering of the world can be studied in each subject “in accordance with the *logos* of its own nature” (97). This *logos* was supposedly “grounded in the divine *logos*, which was incarnate in Christ” (98). This view seems to foreshadow that of McGrath. The next major period mentioned is seventeenth-century Europe, with the rise of modern science. It is discussed under four headings: Quantification, Mechanization, Nature as ‘other’, and Secularization. While dominated by these major themes, this period contained remnants of many different concepts of nature, though most of them appeared as variants of the idea that nature was “God’s epistle written to mankind” (104, quoting R. Boyle) waiting to be unsealed and read.

One of the remnant ideas was a medieval notion of nature as female, to which was added the idea of culture as male. Later, Enlightenment thinkers exploited this imagery in their ideas of reproduction, production, and mastery! A dominant thought pattern to come out of seventeenth-century science was that of “mechanism,” i.e. seeing nature as a self-sustaining machine. Through the centuries, various proponents of this view have used the image of the clock to express their concept of nature. Christians have done so, as have deists and later naturalists. McGrath discusses facets of each of these approaches and critiques the latter two. He also gives a good sketch and critique of postmodernists’ “deconstruction of nature” (110). He explains some of the distinctive views of Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, and Lyotard concerning the meaning and interpretation of texts and reality. Simply put, these authors ultimately assert that (a text and ultimately) “nature” has no meaning of its own apart from what the beholder attributes to it. McGrath’s reaction to this seems to be mixed. Insofar as the postmodernist writers show that all concepts of nature are (in part) social constructs, i.e. concepts shaped under the influence of specific persons, places and times, he goes along with them. He thinks that this critique can help make us aware of the unexamined character of many of our own notions of

nature, e.g. as completely untouched by human interference, as supplying an ultimate standard of what ought and ought not to be. However, insofar as this deconstruction claims that the natural sciences are not in touch with “nature”—that our concept of nature is *wholly* a social construct, and hence that they have nothing special to offer humanity in general (and theology in particular)—he disagrees, saying that “the explanatory and predictive successes of the natural sciences rest upon a real connection to the way things actually are” (122).

McGrath’s disagreement with the postmodern idea of “nature as a social construct” is less clear than it could be. It is slightly perplexing to affirm the idea that there is a “reality [which] awaits our discovery or response, and is not called into being, constructed, projected or invented by the human mind” (75) while also affirming that our idea of nature cannot avoid being “a construction... reflecting theoretical precommitments [and] the outcome of a world-view” (121). Or, in response to his claim that “‘nature’ is a socially mediated concept...viewed through a prism of beliefs and values, reflecting the history and social location of the observer, which inevitably skews the resulting notion” (132), one might ask why this is not equally debilitating to any notion of “reality” in line with McGrath’s professed scientifically-informed “realism”.

A key notion in McGrath’s thought is his belief that both science and theology involve attempts to “grasp something of the rationality of the created order” (196). “God, according to the Christian tradition, created the world in an ordered manner, expressing the distinctive divine rationality” (220). Quoting T.F. Torrance, he says, “[God] created the universe and grounded it in his own transcendent Logos or Rationality” (191, cf.188). While this point is made in many places and by quoting a variety of sources, it is hard to know how to explain it, in spite of the connection drawn between “rationality” and the Logos, Jesus Christ. In discussing the views of Philoponus, McGrath says that we can “explore the God-given ordering of the world through studying each subject ‘in accordance with the logos of its own nature’... The logos which determines the ‘nature’ of an entity is clearly understood to be grounded in the divine logos, which was incarnate in Christ” (97f.). Apart from this appeal to the Logos, and the many Biblical references to Wisdom, one has to ask where in all of scripture can the idea of divine (or any other kind) “rationality” be found.

McGrath’s comprehensive and enthusiastic embrace of this idea is puzzling, in part, because he does not appear to explain this most problematic of Western philosophical ideas. The oldest European tradition to maintain that the order of the world is derived from divine rationality (beginning with Plato, advanced by Plotinus and maintained throughout the middle ages—supremely by

Aquinas) believes that this order emanated from the “being” of God. An alternative to this tradition (the so-called *via antiqua* associated with the name of William of Ockham) arose during the late Middle Ages (i.e. the *via moderna*). It emphasizes that creation was brought about by a free “contingent” act of the divine “will.” Interestingly, McGrath too stresses the “contingent” character of God’s act of creating and accordingly says that “at no point is there any suggestion that the creation is an extension of God, or that it represents the refashioning of part of the divine substance. The creation is ontologically distinct from God” (145). Again paraphrasing the ideas of earlier Christian writers, McGrath says that God “structured the natural order in such a manner that it could be comprehended by the human mind, by conferring upon that order an intrinsic rationality and order which derived from and reflected the divine nature itself” (163). If these passages can be taken as explanatory of what McGrath means by “the rationality of the created order,” then it seems that he is implying intentionally or unintentionally that the world has in it a lot of what the Creator is, i.e. “rationality.” While a guilt-by-association argument—the weakest of arguments—could be made by asking where this notion of “divine rationality” hails from (neither Moses, nor even Solomon would stand up!), the question needs to be addressed on its own merits. Perhaps the world was merely thought out by means of this “rationality” and it is not really intrinsic to its character. If this is what McGrath means, he does not seem to say so. Does the concept of “rationality” (qualified or unqualified) really deserve a central place in a biblically informed view of things? Perhaps volume two or three will clarify this problem.

While much discussion in science and religion emphasizes commonality among theistic faiths, McGrath details how, unlike Judaism and Islam, the uniquely *Christian* doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*—in which Old Testament creation stories are understood in the Christological, *logocentric* light of New Testament passages—provides ontological foundation for an otherwise entirely socially determined concept of nature. McGrath points out that the dominant theme in Jewish scholarship conceives of “creation as the divine subjugation of primeval chaotic forces” (156).

McGrath engages in helpful and incisive critiques of the process theology and naturalism (including naturalistic views of religion) that dominate the discussion in the field of “science and religion.” In doing so, he defines theology as the “genesis, development, and reception of doctrine...answerable to a community of faith” (5) and “a communal attentiveness to Scripture, and a desire to express and communicate what is found there to the church and the world” (44f). He also opposes deism, citing Colin Gunton to argue that a robust Christology and

a trinitarian understanding of creation clarify the connection between creation, providence, and redemption.

An important theme for McGrath is that natural science should play a ministerial, not magisterial role, for theology. Over against the longstanding controversy concerning whether philosophy should serve as the handmaiden of theology (*ancilla theologiae*) or vice versa, he offers the original and provocative thesis that the actual work performed in the natural sciences, though always provisional in terms of its results, can strengthen and otherwise assist theology. And while science can be a helpful tool in theological study, the always-tentative conclusions of science ought not be taken over into Christian doctrine. McGrath gives an insightful account of the Galileo controversy as having its origin in the Council of Trent's counter-Reformation insistence that the consensus of previous theologians be normative (thereby also affirming Aquinas' development, in his thorough incorporation of Aristotelian science into Christian dogma, of Augustine's maxim that science should help interpret unclear passages of Scripture). But McGrath fails to point out that theology, because of its fallibility (demonstrated in this case as uncritical acceptance of science), must not itself play a magisterial role for science.

McGrath, taking his cue from theologian Torrance, argues for the reclamation of a proper role in Reformed thought for natural theology (which, since Barth's devastating critique, was conflated with proving the existence of God). It is resonance, not proof, that studying the natural world offers to Christianity. McGrath finds no reason to disagree with the traditional approach to Psalm 19's "The heavens declare the glory of God" in which "nature-as-creation [has] an ontologically grounded capacity to reflect God" (297), but he also promotes an alternative "covenantal" understanding, recognizing that Scripture is understood by a community of faith which claims that "the

ability of creation to disclose God is not intrinsic [but] grounded in a decision that this shall be the case" (297).

McGrath's treatment of the effects of the fall is disappointing, especially because he faults Aquinas for the same thing (174). He points out that both man and nature suffer effects of the fall (affirming, with Calvin, that "a fallen human mind reflects upon...a fallen world" [174]), but he is not convincing in his listing of chaos, disorder, and entropy as such effects. It would be more appropriate to point out that these can certainly be seen as features of the good pre-fall creation (unless there is an utterly unfathomable chasm between pre- and post-fall worlds), but that "thorns and thistles" (Gen. 3:18) are clear effects of the fall on the non-human creation. Precisely what the physical effects of the fall were remains a mystery: how do galactic clusters and neutrinos "groan in travail" (Rom. 8:22)?

We eagerly anticipate the publication of the remainder of McGrath's trilogy and recommend the book to anyone interested in historical, philosophical, or theological perspectives in or out of the natural sciences; we plan to use portions in our course on these topics in the fall semester. Penned by an erudite and sensitive Christian author, *Nature* contains a wealth of insight and scholarly resources on a number of fundamental topics. While his understanding of the theoretical significance of a world-view is valuable, it resembles only the beginning stage from which the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd advanced Kuyper's ideas in formulating a Christian theory of theorizing. Nevertheless, McGrath is blazing new trails that many of Christ's people can fruitfully follow. Readers unfamiliar with Latin, Greek, French, and German would do well to have dictionaries handy, as words and phrases in these languages are often used without translation to make important points.

*Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life*, by Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). xxxi, 316 pp. Hardback \$23.95. ISBN 0-7879-5698-8. Reviewed by Dr. Scott A. Quatro, Assistant Professor of Business Management, Dordt College.

The topic of spirituality in the workplace has gained prominence in the business scene over the last 12 years. It is perhaps at once the most compelling and least understood force driving organizational theory and practice today. From a Christian perspective, this is an exciting development, given the opportunities such a trend affords for impacting organizational life for Christ. It is ostensibly this belief that motivated the research of Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan, resulting in the publication of their work *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday*. Nash and McLennan make a well-balanced team for inquiry into the intriguing world of workplace spirituality. Nash, a Senior

Research Fellow at Harvard Business School, aptly covers the practitioner/lay-person perspective, while McLennan, an ordained minister and Dean for Religious Life at Stanford University, brings the perspective of the clergy/church professional.

In the introduction to their book, they lament the lack of significant influence the mainstream Christian church has had on the workplace spirituality movement, thereby articulating the driving force behind the project:

The church could be one of the strongest resources we have for leading a balanced and effective business life. In most cases, it is not. It could provide spiritual and