

Comparing science with theology

A review of
A Scientific Theology
Volume 1: Nature
by **Alister E. McGrath**
Eerdmans, 2001

Andrew S. Kulikovsky

This is the first volume of a three volume series which aims to present a ‘Scientific Theology’. This first volume looks at ‘Nature’; the second, ‘Reality’; and the third covers ‘Theory’. The author, Alister E. McGrath, is professor of historical theology at Oxford University. He also holds a Ph.D. in molecular biophysics from Oxford.

McGrath states upfront:

‘It is the contention of this work that the relationship of Christian theology to the natural sciences is that of two fundamentally related disciplines, whose working methods reflect this common grounding in responding to a reality which lies beyond them, of which they are bound to give an ordered account’ (p. xviii).

But in what way are they ‘fundamentally related’? And how do their working methods reflect a common grounding?

McGrath criticises those who seek to employ the social sciences as a window into theology:

‘Precisely on account of their radical and often aggressive commitment to a naturalist world-view, the social sciences offer a skewed perspective on religion which, in the first place, refuses to acknowledge an ancillary role to theology, and in the second place, denies the entire legitimacy of the theologi-

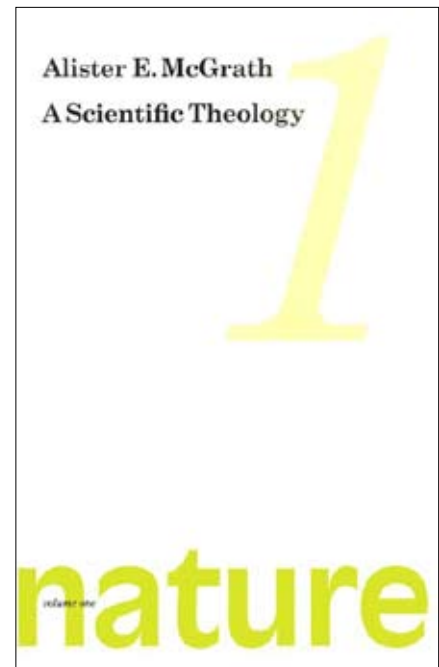
cal project, as this is traditionally conceived’ (p. 15).

Fundamental problems of natural science

But does McGrath seriously believe that the natural sciences do not suffer the same fundamental problems? If so, then McGrath is breath-takingly naïve at this point. Does not the theory of evolution—which the overwhelming majority of ‘natural’ scientists accept without reservation—have exactly the same aggressive naturalist commitments and make exactly the same denials? Even those scientists who are Christians and who have a high view of Scripture tend to place scientific conclusions on the same level as the statements of Scripture (i.e. ‘dual revelation’ theory or ‘two books’ hypothesis) and in practice usually accept scientific consensus over Scripture.

McGrath’s approach to theology ‘seeks to find illumination from the manner in which the natural sciences have grappled with the problems of epistemology—that is, with the question of how true knowledge is acquired, and what form that knowledge takes’ (p. 35).

The author appears to believe that the natural sciences are inherently or at least ideally objective (p. 18), and argues that since God created the world, it should reveal something of his character and nature (p. 21). However, he also rightly acknowledges the provisional nature of scientific conclusions (pp. 45–47). This is encouraging given that many other Christian writers treat scientific truth claims as virtually equivalent to the very words of God Himself. He further notes that while the 18th century British theologians who forged an alliance between Newtonian physics and Christian theology are now regarded with a degree of pity and historical



curiosity, in their time their ideas were seen as cutting edge and thoroughly up to date (pp. 48–49). This should act as a warning to those who want to use scientific conclusions as a guide or as an ‘acid test’ for the interpretation of Scripture.

On page 50, he writes:

‘The procedure adopted in this work is not to base an account of a scientific theology upon the allegedly secure findings of the natural sciences, but upon the methods and working assumptions which underlie those sciences—supremely a belief in the regularity of the natural world, and the ability of the human mind to uncover and represent this regularity in a mathematical manner.’

But as McGrath himself notes, the findings of science are very often not ‘secure’. Scientific ‘truth’ regularly changes—and changes significantly—which indicates the belief regarding ‘the ability of the human mind to uncover and represent this regularity in a mathematical manner’ is a flawed foundation!

Appeal to Augustine

In order to argue for the importance of respecting the conclusions of

the sciences in relation to biblical exegesis, McGrath appeals to Augustine:

‘In his commentary on Genesis, Augustine pointed out that certain passages were genuinely open to diverse interpretations, without calling into question any fundamental doctrines of the Church. It was therefore important to allow further scientific research to assist in the determination of which was the most appropriate mode of interpretation for a given passage’ (p. 61).

But Augustine lived long before the establishment of the natural sciences as they are understood and practised today (17th–18th century). The only ‘science’ Augustine could be referring to is the Aristotelianism which had steadily infiltrated the Church. Indeed, McGrath himself notes this previously on page 41 and subsequently on page 62. Augustine argued that biblical interpretation should take into account everything that can be reasonably regarded as scientific fact. McGrath writes:

‘This approach to biblical interpretation can be argued to prevent Christian theology from becoming trapped in a pre-scientific worldview, or improperly committing itself to a specific scientific outlook which would become outmoded through progress Nevertheless, it was an approach which was not without its difficulties, not least of which was the question of whether an allegedly “scientific” belief was a permanently valid insight into the nature of the world, or simply a culturally conditioned response to events, a traditional belief resting on the authority of an acknowledged master, or a fallacy which would be discarded by subsequent generations’ (p. 62).

He adds:



Aristotle 384–322 BC

Courtesy: THE Graphics

‘... medieval biblical exposition and systematic theology can be shown to have followed Augustine’s advice in deferring to science, and thus perpetuated what can now be recognized to be the unscientific influence of Aristotle.’

Regarding the Galileo controversy, McGrath acknowledges that

‘... a much more plausible and satisfactory reading of the historical data is that the controversy arose precisely because too much weight was given to what the early generations of theologians and philosophers had been led to understand were the established certainties of the sciences. In particular, it is important to note the immense influence of the Aristotelian commentators on the intellectual life of the period’ (p. 62).

It is refreshing to see a theologian acknowledge the real issues and historical context behind the Galileo affair rather than simplistically characterising it as a case of dubious scriptural interpretation verses hard scientific facts. Again, this should act as a strong warning to those who place great au-

thority in the truth claims of modern science, including those theologians who try to enlist the big bang theory as proof of the biblical cosmology.

Scientific unrealism

The author maintains that natural sciences offer important resource in that they cause the Church to constantly re-evaluate its interpretations of Scripture which ensures the scientific beliefs of earlier generations are not inadvertently incorporated into the doctrines of the Church (p. 64). We would agree, provided that we can be confident of the truth of scientific claims. In many cases, the ‘truth’ claims of the natural sciences have very little ‘science’ behind them. Much too often, scientific ‘discoveries’ and ‘proofs’ are nothing more than a blinkered interpretation of selected data, philosophical speculation, or mere opinion.

McGrath notes the tendency to view the relationship between science and theology as static without reference to prevailing social, political, economic and cultural factors, and adds:

‘This unhistorical approach to the issue has let to the totally unacceptable retrojection of the polemical concerns of the late nineteenth century onto earlier periods of history, leading to a number of serious historical distortions. Thus the “Galileo Affair” is widely read by anti-religious activists as a classic example of “science verses religion” ’ (pp. 65–66).

Indeed, this same criticism can also be directed at many evangelical commentators and historians, not just anti-religious activists.

McGrath believes that natural scientists are generally realists in outlook:

‘... natural scientists are realists because of the force of evidence, not on account of pressure within the scientific community or the force of inherited assumptions’ (p. 73).

And as a former research scientist himself, he claims to have a superior outlook and subtly chastises

those who critique scientific practice without this experience. But like most scientists, McGrath has a very naïve philosophical outlook. Firstly, he fails to consider the need for interpretation of scientific results. Secondly, he appears to believe that experimental results speak for themselves, and thirdly, his unsupported claim stands against the extensive research of Thomas Kuhn, Michael Polanyi and others showing the contrary. Indeed, the theory of evolution is a classic example of scientific *unrealism*. The vast majority of scientists are committed to evolutionism *in spite of the evidence!*

It is interesting to note that in his discussion of the construction of nature, McGrath appears to contradict himself in regard to scientific realism. He demonstrates that the idea of ‘nature’ is not a simple objective entity or concept:

‘Nature’ is thus not a neutral entity, having the status of an “observation statement”; it involves seeing the world in a particular way—and the way in which it is seen shapes the resulting concept of “nature.” Far from being a “given”, the idea of “nature” is shaped by the prior assumptions of the observer. One does not “observe” nature; one constructs it ... If the concept of nature is socially mediated—to whatever extent—it cannot serve as an allegedly neutral, objective or uninterrupted foundation of a theory or theology. *Nature is already an interpreted category*’ (p. 113, emphasis in original).

The Doctrine of Creation

In his discussion of the Christian doctrine of Creation, McGrath approvingly cites Emil Brunner’s approach which sees the statements of the New Testament as the starting point and having priority over the Genesis account (pp. 143–144). But despite McGrath’s claims to the contrary, Brunner’s approach is simply a manifestation of the overall approach of the theological school he represents. How can the incidental and passing

statements regarding Creation which are found in the New Testament take priority over the detailed and specific account in Genesis? How can the incarnation of Christ and his subsequent crucifixion have any significance or meaning without the Genesis account of Creation and the Fall? In fact, one can see immediately that his exegetical analysis is shallow when he writes: ‘The two creation accounts of the book of Genesis ...’ (p. 144).

He also claims that Psalm 19:1 implies that Israel should be able to discern the glory of God by studying the created order (p. 149). But this is just plain nonsense. The heavens declare God’s glory—it is obvious! No study or scientific analysis is needed.

McGrath cites Ludwig Köhler: ‘creation in the Old Testament is not a statement about the natural sciences, but about human history’ (p. 152). With this statement, most young-earth creationists would certainly agree, but McGrath concludes that the creation account:

‘... is therefore not an answer to the question: “How did the world come into existence?” Rather it

deals with the question: “From what does the history of the people of God derive its meaning?”—to which the answer is “from the creation”.’

This conclusion simply does not follow from Köhler’s statement. In fact, McGrath’s conclusion is incoherent. Firstly, the creation account is *the beginning* of the history of God’s people. We are firstly God’s people because God is our Creator! Secondly, what exactly does McGrath’s ‘question’ above actually mean? Who exactly is he talking about when he refers to the ‘people of God’? What ‘meaning’ is he talking about? ‘Meaning’ in relation to what? He continues:

‘In general terms, Old Testament scholarship has tended to regard the doctrine of creation as being theologically secondary and chronologically late.’

But the ‘Old Testament scholarship’ to which McGrath refers is the writings of two liberal German theologians—Emil Brunner and Gerhard von Rad. This is hardly a thorough or representative survey! Evangelical theologians and philosophers such as

Carl F.H. Henry, A.M. Wolters, Graeme Goldsworthy, Wayne Grudem, Millard Erickson, J.P. Moreland and Norman Geisler would certainly not agree. Neither would the early church fathers since the doctrine of Creation begins the Apostle’s Creed (c. AD 100): ‘I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth’; and the Nicene Creed (AD 325): ‘We believe in one God, father almighty, maker of all things, both visible and invisible.’

When considering the New Testament teaching on Creation, he writes: ‘The New Testament is seen as offering a framework by which the Old Testament may



Augustine (AD 354–430)

be interpreted' (p. 155). This is very simplistic. The Old Testament provides the theological basis for the interpretation of the New Testament, and the New Testament highlights the significance of the people and events of the Old Testament. For example, the atonement and propitiation which resulted from Christ's death can only be fully understood and appreciated by understanding the Old Testament sacrificial system—in particular, the 'sin offering'. Moreover, the writer of the Hebrews points out the significance of Melchizedek the priest who was a 'type' of Christ in that he remained a priest forever (Heb. 7:3). This kind of confusion and misunderstanding from such a well known and influential professor of theology is inexcusable.

He also claims, again with no substantiation, that the history of Jewish exegesis shows that the most compelling reading of the Old Testament was not a doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* (p. 156). But apart from this being unsubstantiated, it is also plain wrong. The Talmudic writers saw God's existence prior to all things as one of His basic attributes,¹ and therefore everything in the universe must have been created by God. Thus, not only is everything dependent on Him, but everything has a beginning. Indeed, the Aristotelian idea of the eternity of matter was resisted by the Rabbis.²

McGrath goes on to state:

'The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is primarily concerned with ontological origin, rather than with temporal beginnings. The doctrine is not primarily concerned—if, indeed, it is concerned at all—with issues of chronology and dating; the specific issue concerns the ontological dependence of the cosmos upon its creator.'

This is all too familiar and I continue to be amazed at how theologians—especially those with a high view of Scripture—can tell us what Scripture teaches while paying little attention to what the Scriptures actually say! If ontological dependence was the primary concern then the first verse (Genesis 1:1) would be sufficient. Fur-

thermore, if chronology and dating are of no concern then why is the Creation clearly presented as a series of events occurring over a normal week?

In his discussion of the implications of a Christian doctrine of Creation, McGrath approvingly quotes Galileo: 'Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it' (p. 210).

But mathematics is merely a formal way of describing (and often, merely approximating) some of the tangible things that we observe. Yet, mathematics cannot describe such things as purpose, meaning, motives and intent, nor can it express emotions. Nevertheless, McGrath notes the widespread agreement that mathematics can describe 'the patterns and symmetries found at every level of the created order' (p. 213). He adds:

'One of the most significant parallels between the natural sciences and Christian theology is a fundamental conviction that the world is characterized by regularity and intelligibility' (p. 218).

Yet Christian theology also allows for God's intervention through miracles and divine judgment, including catastrophic judgment like the global Flood in the time of Noah. This is a critical point which science is unable to cope with.

McGrath points out that T.F. Torrance noted that one of the fundamental dilemmas of natural science is 'that it cannot be proved that there is order in the world, in that such proof would imply the prior assumption of precisely such an order'. This observation is particularly interesting in light of the fact that many of those in the 'Intelligent Design' movement are doing exactly this when they appeal to the natural

sciences as an empirical basis for theism. According to McGrath, Torrance regarded this point as

'an important and significant indication of the fundamental convergence between Christian theology and the natural sciences, and a clear illustration of the advantages of undertaking scientific investigation from the perspective of a Christian world-view' (p. 221).

Thus, those in the Intelligent Design movement have a back-to-front approach. They should be looking to Scripture and theology for guidance in their interpretation of the world, rather than trying to draw theological and philosophical conclusions from scientific data.

The problems with natural theology

In his discussion of the purpose and place of Natural Theology, McGrath notes that this phenomenon first arose within the English theological tradition and reflects the social and ecclesiastical conditions of the 17th–18th century:

'A natural religion, which was grounded in the regularities of the natural world, was widely seen as offering a more restrained and stable basis for polite English society' (p. 243).

Natural theology was prompted by (1) the rise of biblical criticism which called into question the reliability of Scripture as a vehicle of truth; (2) the rejection of ecclesiastical authority; (3) the rejection of organised religion in favour of nature as a source of revelation and object of worship; and (4) the continuing successes of the mechanical worldview (p. 244). In light of this, one can clearly see why the historic doctrine of Creation and the traditional interpretation of the creation account were eroded, ignored or rejected, in favour of deistic notions, and I believe that the modern 'Intelligent Design' movement is perilously close to repeating the same mistakes.

McGrath rightly acknowledges:

'... while the Old Testament

clearly endorses that something of God may be known through creation, it does not endorse any notion of nature as an autonomous source of knowledge of God' (p. 259).

He also points to Alvin Plantinga's objection to natural theology as a means of proving God's existence, since that would imply that belief in God is grounded in more basic beliefs such as rationality and the reliability of the senses (p. 264). However, he believes it is still possible to frame a natural theology in such a way that does not involve any intention to prove the existence of God. For McGrath, natural theology is better understood as a demonstration of the consonance between faith and the structures of the real world:

'... natural theology is not intended to prove the existence of God, but presupposes that existence ... The search for order is therefore not intended to demonstrate that God exists, but to reinforce the plausibility of an already existing belief' (p. 266).

Similarly, both T.F. Torrance and Karl Barth believed that natural theology 'is undermined, relativized and set aside by the actual knowledge of God mediated through Christ'.³ McGrath cites Torrance:

'God's revelation becomes manifest to us as it brings into full light the buried and forgotten truth of the creation. In other words, while knowledge of God is grounded in his own intelligible revelation to us, it requires for its actualization an appropriate rational structure in our cognising of it, but that rational structure does not arise unless we allow our minds to fall under the compulsion of God's being who he really is in the act of his self-revelation and grace, and as such cannot be derived from an analysis of our autonomous subjectivity.'

Torrance believed that 'Natural theology has its place under the aegis of revelation, not outside it. In its proper mode, a "natural theology" is an approach to theology which leads to the introduction of "natural" concepts

into theology without first establishing the warrant for doing so on the basis of revelation' (p. 283).

Torrance insists that creation can only point to its Creator when one responds to revelation and recognises nature as God's creation rather than a self-created or autonomous entity. He states

'Natural theology by its very operation abstracts the existence of God from his act, so that if it does not begin with deism, it imposes deism upon theology' (p. 284).

It was pleasing to see that McGrath acknowledges the implications and effects of sin for natural theology (p. 286ff), and points out that Torrance argued that sin affects the very fabric of Creation including human nature and reason at the deepest level. This is a critical point which too many evangelical commentators fail to consider.

McGrath intends to affirm that: 'Christian theology provides an interpretive framework by which nature may be interpreted. This approach takes nature to be *expli-candum*, something which requires or demands explication, but is not itself possessed of the intrinsic capacity or ability to offer such an explanation.'

But while it is fine to explore the relationship between theology and other disciplines, theology (i.e. the teaching of Scripture) should be the spectacles through which we look at all other disciplines. Neither the natural sciences nor any other discipline should be treated as equal to Scripture or to exegetical theology. Although McGrath acknowledges that the role of the sciences is limited and is primarily supportive, he still tends to give too much weight to scientific truth claims.

Conclusion

This volume is primarily aimed at academics and I believe it will have little appeal outside those circles. Even then, the scholarship is uneven. In some places McGrath shows great insight; at other places, he appears

confused and contradictory.

It is often quite difficult to follow McGrath's trail of thought through the book. Part of the problem is that he spends much time surveying, summarising and critiquing the views of others but rarely openly declares his own convictions.

McGrath has clearly been most influenced by T.F. Torrance. He adopts the same general approach as Torrance and many of the insightful comments in the book are often straight citations from Torrance's writings. Therefore, one would probably benefit much more by reading Torrance's work directly, especially since he does not display the same general confusion that McGrath does.

The book also contains a lengthy but selective bibliography. Very few evangelical works make it into this list, however. The most notable exceptions are J.P. Moreland's *Christianity and the Nature of Science*, Carl F.H. Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority*, and A.M. Wolters' *Creation Regained*.

References

1. See Cohen, A., *Everyman's Talmud*, Schocken, New York, pp. 1-2, 1995.
2. See Cohen, Ref. 1, pp. 29-30.
3. Torrance, T.F., The problem of natural theology in the thought of Karl Barth, *Religious Studies* 6:125, 1970.