Reviews

Paul Allen & Flavia Marcacci (eds)
Divined Explanations: The Theological and Philosophical Context for the Development of the Sciences (1600-2000)
Leiden: Koninklijke Brill BV, 2025. 321 pp. hb £146.40 ISBN 9789004701885

The aim of this book seems to be to explore how scientific theories develop through the interaction of scientists' beliefs, theological, philosophical and metaphysical, and their scientific imagination and creativity. This is done through a series of twelve case studies covering the period 1600-2000.

After an introductory chapter, the book is divided equally (in terms of chapters) into two parts: Early Modernity – 19th Century; and Twentieth Century. Some chapters make for easier and more interesting reading than others, which is to be expected in an edited book.

Having started out as a mathematician I found chapter 5 on Bolzano particularly interesting. His name is familiar to mathematicians because of the Bolzano–Weierstrass theorem and his other mathematical contributions. The chapter discusses how Bolzano grounds the existence of an actual infinity in his understanding of God's existence and attributes. Bolzano even suggested the existence of infinities of different sizes, a notion later formalised by Cantor who was aware of Bolzano's work.

Chapter 7 on Social Darwinism and Race is interesting in that it makes the claim that 'Christian interpretations of Darwinism … were insufficiently attentive to Darwin's implicitly Christian anthropology of human equality.'(125) The focus usually being on the implications of his theory for divine creation and human uniqueness. Darwin was committed to the abolition of slavery based on his view that all human beings are equal. Darwin was not a social Darwinist! This chapter suggests that had Christian churches been less concerned about issues around creation they could have used Darwin's views to counter the rise of so-called scientific racism.

Another interesting chapter is Chapter 9 on Georges Lemaître's Primeval Atom Hypothesis. It shows how his thinking developed from an expanding universe with no beginning to one with a beginning (now commonly known as the Big Bang). His thinking was not simply theologically driven as he distinguished between creation and beginning.

Other chapters in the second half of the book cover the work of well-known 20th century scientific and mathematical luminaries such as Albert Einstein, Max Planck, Kurt Gödel and John Wheeler, which made it generally more interesting (to me at least). The first half of the book discusses less familiar figures such as Fortunato of Brescia, Franciscus Frabricius, Martin Schurig, Bernard Bolzano and Pierre Duhem as well as the more familiar ones of Descartes and Darwin.

Overall, while the book contains some fascinating historical information, it did leave me wondering who its intended audience is meant to be. The earlier chapters seem to require the reader to be familiar with various aspects of scientific thinking across a range of topics in the early modern period if one is to evaluate the conclusions being drawn, which I am clearly not competent to do. Even with the 20th century figures one would need to be familiar with some aspects of their work which a non-expert (me) is unlikely to have knowledge of. It seems to be a book written by specialists for specialists, and not for the general reader.

My major problem with this book, as with many others on science and faith that have been published over recent years, is that it has little relevance to the practising scientist; that is, to the average reader of this journal. The conversation on science and faith seems to have taken an inward turn to become a conversation among science and faith (or science and religion) academic specialists, in the process becoming more 'erudite' and less generally helpful. Therefore, I cannot recommend this book to readers of *Science & Christian Belief.* In any case, at the price being charged, it will only be affordable to a limited number of university libraries.

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Andrew Ter Ern Loke

Natural Theology: A Reassessment

Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2026. xx+309 pp. hb. £155.00. ISBN 9781032985619

Andrew Loke is an associate professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University, and a leading philosopher of religion. This book is a *tour de force*, presenting a wide-ranging study of natural theology. Loke takes the classical position on what natural theology is, namely what can be known about God through observing the natural world without any appeal to religious presuppositions. He traces back his classical view to ancient Greece, and sees it in theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas. He is critical of other views such as that of Alister McGrath who effectively turns natural theology into a 'theology of revelation.' He is also critical of other approaches contrary to the classical one, such as presuppositionalism, fideism, and reformed epistemology, although milder forms may be compatible with the classical. He follows scholars such as James Barr (and myself) in arguing that natural theology is affirmed in Scripture, and he counters interpretations, such as those of Karl Barth and Andrew Moore, which deny this.

When it comes to natural theology in practice, Loke uses deductive arguments and is critical of scholars who use inductive approaches, especially those who deploy probabilistic (Bayesian confirmation theory) arguments such as Richard Swinburne and myself. He does, however, seem to open a door when he says that his arguments do not demonstrate 'that other possible hypotheses have zero probability,' only that they can be eliminated if their probability is shown to be low enough (p. 72, n. 9) – that indeed can be done utilising Bayesianism. Also, he affirms the usefulness of Bayesian probability in justifying Ockham's razor – parsimonious hypotheses are more probable *a priori* than less parsimonious alternatives. Moreover, he rightly sees, as do Swinburne and I, the value of an evidential two-stage process affirming first what has been called 'general revelation' and secondly 'special revelation' (what we term 'natural theology' and 'ramified natural theology').

In his deductive approach, Loke is utilizing a strong form of epistemic foundationalism, which he competently reassesses, criticizing those who deny this approach, e.g., Willard Quine who adopts coherentism instead. It is worth noting that a theologian who rejects foundationalism is Alister McGrath, though adopting the Nicene-Chalcedonian definitions as a starting point might in fact be considered a rather strong form of it. Loke is meticulous and comprehensive with attention to fine detail, e.g., he spends considerable effort in countering those who deny the

Law of Non-Contradiction (A and not-A cannot both be true).

It is worth noting that the book is much more devoted to philosophical and theological matters of principle than of the arguments of natural theology themselves, which the author has developed in other of his writings, although these are discussed to a degree. In particular he uses the cosmological argument, and to a lesser degree the teleological and moral arguments. Moreover, the cosmological argument is not simply a response to the 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' question, but some scholars would say, the more debatable form which focuses on a temporal beginning to the universe, which Loke justifies from paradoxes of infinite regress rather than more uncertain cosmological theories. For Loke the cosmological argument is a deductively valid argument from true premises (see pp. 70-71 for a concise summary), a point he repeatedly makes in justifying his approach when ranging over and critiquing many epistemological problems and alternatives. Among the latter he notes how scientism and verificationism cannot be justified by their own criteria, and he shows how relativist views of reasoning to metaphysical claims (also relativism in moral discourse) are self-contradictory.

Theologically, Loke argues against apophaticism and the idea that we cannot know anything about a transcendent being. This includes a critique of Barth's rejection of *analogia entis* and embrace of *analogia fidei* (the only knowledge we have comes through faith in God's revelation of himself in Christ). His discussion of analogy more generally, particularly whether this be equivocal or (his preferred view), at least in part univocal, is particularly helpful.

The author displays considerable self-confidence in asserting the correctness of his assertions against numerous major scholars, and should perhaps heed the warning he gives towards the end of the book, namely that pride can impact the views of both the atheist and the theist. Nevertheless, with its panoramic assessment of the field, the book will be a major resource for all working in natural theology.

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Yuen Kwok-Yung

My Life in Medicine: A Hong Kong Journey

Hong Kong University Press, 2024, pb 268 pp. £16.98. ISBN 9789888842940

This book is an autobiography which weaves together the author's life as a medical practitioner, the personal stories of his elders and peers, and the hidden world of epidemic outbreak control in Hong Kong. What sets it apart are the author's experiences, deeply rooted in Hong Kong's cultural and historical context, which makes the narrative especially refreshing. Yuen Kwok-Yung became an internationally prominent academic, physician, and microbiologist during SARS and COVID-19 and it is particularly intriguing to discover his earlier life as a physician and surgeon, as well as his efforts and struggles as a researcher of outbreaks.

The book also offers striking insights into the nature of outbreak investigation, which requires thorough and conscientious effort. In an outbreak, there can be a lot of potential sources of the microbe – many samples have to be taken, and every step of the process has to be scrutinized. One of the most memorable examples in the book is to discover *Pseudomonas fluorescens* on cooling packs in the trucks transporting blood bags. Meticulous thought and attention to detail was required to figure out that the source

of contamination was from the transport of blood bags rather than the actual process of blood transfusion.

Although detecting a positive sample after rigorous investigation brings relief and satisfaction, managing an outbreak is not without obstacles. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the author received multiple death threats due to his advocacy for the closure of poultry and wild game markets. On top of that, when explaining the investigation process to the public, the author also compared his team to Sherlock Holmes, likening their search for the origins of the viral strain to a 'crime scene'. However, this lighthearted metaphor soon sparked a Medical Council complaint that threatened his career. As is apparent from these instances, it certainly takes courage to withstand immense public pressure and speak up for the right course of action.

Apart from showing life 'behind-the-scenes of pandemic control', the book also offers a glimpse into the author's life journey. He was first trained as a physician, then as a surgeon at United Christian Hospital. Later, he took a leap of faith and switched to the newly opened Department of Microbiology at Queen Mary Hospital. Despite a career in medicine, earlier in secondary school, he was passionate about astronomy, which providentially prepared him for the hunt for novel viruses in a constellation of pathogens in the future. Reflecting on the author's life trajectory, it is his diversified experiences that made him a truly unique physician-scientist. This reminds the reader to stay true to themselves and embrace life's opportunities – only then can they live a life of passion and excellence.

Last but not least, the author's love and devotion to others is evident in both his personal and professional life. The inclination to help others and the willingness to go the extra mile, contributed significantly to his success. From empowering sick peers to housing teens from troubled backgrounds, the primary intent was to see others improve or feel better. During the pandemic, his dedication to discovering the root cause left no stone unturned. His endeavours to uncover potential novel pathogens also prepared society for, if not prevented, future outbreaks. Such dedication is solely fuelled by the desire to protect multitudes of families from loss and suffering.

In summary, this book not only reveals a less-known perspective of various epidemics in Hong Kong, but it also dives into the author's personal journey, as well as illuminates his devotion to medicine and the people around him. A phrase he wrote in the last chapter, encapsulates his mentality: 'Curiosity breeds innovation, logic sets paths, perseverance brings results, but only love endures.' Indeed, curiosity made him a lifelong learner, logic helped him understand and apply his knowledge, perseverance sustained his efforts. But it was love for his patients, for his community that made it all worthwhile.

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Liza Abraham

Chemistry, Faith and Stewardship: Uniting Biblical Wisdom with Scientific Practice

Resource Publications (Wipf and Stock), 2025. 123 pp. pb. £15. ISBN 9798385258055

Liza Abraham is an Associate Professor of Chemistry, who is clearly passionate about both her faith and the world of chemistry. She strives to unite science and faith, and her desire to integrate the secular and sacred is evident throughout this short book, in which she describes

science research as a form of Christian worship. She states that science always points to God and draws us closer to him (113) and at its best, it is more than discovery, it is a journey of awe and wonder.

The style is devotional, contemplative and inspirational rather than didactic. It is thoroughly scriptural and contains about 400 bible references. It also contains a commitment to creation care and makes frequent reference to 'green chemistry' and the need to seek non-polluting chemical alternatives for sustainable innovation.

The book contains eleven short chapters, each one about ten pages long. These don't really cohere, though each contains some worthy and interesting ideas. Several of these raise fascinating issues that could each merit much wider discussion.

The book begins with the words of Psalm 24 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it' which sets the foundation for the rest of the book. Everything does not merely exist, but proclaims God's glory and furthers His purposes. This section contains examples of parables from nature, everyday wonders that reveal the creator and are 'shadows that point to Christ'. In short paragraphs she considers the wonders of a bird's egg, the bald eagle and the salmon run.

The book is written in a devotional, contemplative and meditative style and contains several poetic and allegorical comparisons, some of which seem rather contrived. In chapter 2, when considering trees, she suggests (19) that the process of photosynthesis reveals a divine metaphor: A tree takes in carbon dioxide, water and light, and transforms them into glucose and oxygen, which is of course correct - the author then states that this is 'spiritually reflecting the Triune God, working in perfect unity to give life'. I don't really follow the analogy!

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 consider the properties of water, stones and light and are full of biblical references to each of these. In chapter 3 the author reminds us of water's remarkable properties, despite its simple chemical structure, and this is described alongside several bible texts referring to the Living Water. The chapter concludes with reflections on water pollution alongside an experimental activity

Chapter 4 is about precious stones and types of rock, and refers to bible verses about them. The ways that they are formed remind us of God's transforming work, and of Christ as the cornerstone. I would have liked to learn more about diamonds, bdellium, onyx, obsidian etc, and there is much for a chemist to explore here.

Chapter 5 concerns light, the nature of the electromagnetic spectrum, and the vital importance of photosynthesis and vitamin D synthesis. Again, these are described alongside many bible verses that refer to light. As for the previous 2 chapters the author uses analogical and allegorical comparisons to relate the chemistry to the bible verses and how they might apply. For these three chapters I felt that there was much more chemistry to explore beyond the allegories.

Each chapter closes with some relevant practicals and reflections. Some of these practicals can be done at home, while others require toxic or corrosive compounds and can only be done in a chemistry lab.

Chapters 6 (The rhythm of rest), 7 (A man according to God's heart – delighting in God and His word) and 8 (Building on the rock: a life anchored in the word) are relevant to Christians working in almost any career, emphasising the need to take appropriate rest and the reliance on God's words and meditating on Scripture. There is nothing wrong in these, but they aren't directly related to Chemistry. In short paragraphs Solomon, David, Joshua, Nehemiah and Daniel are each given

as examples of men who trusted God and studied his word. I couldn't see why this was relevant to the book's theme. During this, there is a digression to consider bees, that patiently gathering nectar, and cows chewing the cud (though technically cows don't have four stomachs).

Chapters 9 and 10 are the ones most specifically related to chemistry, and highlight this as an important Christian career and fascinating area for research. These include an emphasis on the importance of 'green chemistry'. This is indeed important, but the author doesn't give many specific examples of how this might be achieved by a practising chemist. She refers to seventeen strategic develop goals and twelve principles of green chemistry, but these are not described, and the reader is left to follow these from the reference list.

Chapter 11 describes 'The spiritual man' and contains two examples of Christian chemists (though the text promised three) and briefly outlines the work of Robert Boyle and Alister McGrath. James Clerk Maxwell and Francis Collins are mentioned in passing, but several eminent chemists aren't included in this section (e.g., Michael Faraday and Charles Coulson etc).

This book is a worthy attempt to say something devotional about Chemistry. It is rather unfocussed, and a little superficial, and to my mind the allegorical analogies are overplayed; I was left wanting more and to see how (green) Chemistry might be better used for human flourishing and God's glory.

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Yujin Nagasawa

The Problem of Evil for Atheists

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 268 pp. hb. £76.00. ISBN 9780198901884

The problem of evil is traditionally conceived as an argument against belief in God who is all-powerful and all-loving (which I'll call simply 'theism'). It seems that, if such a god exists, then evil should not, because God would have both the ability and the intent to prevent it. But evil does exist.

But Yujin Nagasawa suggests that evil is not merely a problem for theists – though despite his title, atheism is only one of the non-theistic positions that he considers. First, he categorises the traditional problem of evil as a 'problem of axiological expectation mismatch' (35). This means that, if we think God exists, we expect that evil should not. But we see that it does. This gap between expectation and observation generates the problem.

Next, Nagasawa points out that theism is not the only position which can lead to an expectation of no evil. He identifies pantheism (the view that the universe itself is divine) and axiarchism (the view that the existence of the universe is caused by an impersonal ethical principle) as falling into this category, before turning to atheism. Here, Nagasawa introduces the problem of 'systemic evil', observing that the process of evolution by natural selection requires enormous suffering over hundreds of millions of years. This, for Nagasawa, generates an acute version of the problem of evil, because it focuses on evil that is baked into the natural processes that make possible our existence.

He then defines 'modest optimism' as the view that '[o]verall and fundamentally, the environment in which we exist is not bad' (142). Most people hold this view, consciously or otherwise, includ-

ing most atheists. But modest optimism generates an expectation about the world that clashes with the harsh truth of systemic evil. There is, then, a problem of evil for all modest optimists. And Nagasawa argues that theism offers the best resources for addressing this problem. Theists can, for example, appeal to the hidden purposes of God, or to the possibility of restitution in future lives or worlds, but atheists cannot.

Nagasawa's argument is ingenious, but I do think that while theists are really committed to modest (or stronger) optimism, atheists are not. That seems to give atheists a clear solution to the problem, unavailable to theists: they can simply abandon modest optimism. Nagasawa does consider objections like this (185-86, 187-89). His main response is to appeal to the strong psychological appeal of modest optimism. To abandon optimism, he suggests, 'would raise serious existential concerns' and lead to views 'which many would find morally repugnant' (188-89), such as pessimism (the view that the world is mostly bad) and antinatalism (the view that it is morally wrong to have children).

But even if we accept that pessimism and antinatalism are repugnant, the fact that an argument has consequences we find unpleasant is not a good reason to think it wrong – only a reason to *want* it to be wrong. And no good reason has been given to think – assuming atheism – that modest optimism is true. Nagasawa himself cites Tali Sharot (149) pointing out that our optimism is typically misjudged: people routinely overestimate the probability of good things happening and underestimate the probability of bad things. But then the mismatch between modest optimism and systemic evil is not surprising – we should *expect* the world to be worse than we typically think it is. If that is so, the problem of evil does look like an intellectual problem only for theists and others with a metaphysics that entails that the world *actually is* mostly good.

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Fern Elsdon-Baker, Stephen H. Jones, and James Riley (Eds)

International Perspectives on Science, Culture, and Belief: From Complexity to Globality.

Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2025. 275 pp. hb. £150, ISBN 9781040395943

Readers will no doubt be familiar with the 'conflict thesis' that posits an irreconcilable intellectual gap between the teachings of religion and science. The thesis has its roots in the nineteenth century and especially in WEIRD (White, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) societies. How relevant is it in the wider world of today? That is the question that a ten-year piece of multidisciplinary research supported by a Templeton grant entitled 'Science and Religion Exploring the Spectrum' (SRES and SRES2) sought to answer. This book presents the findings from that research.

Part 1 of the book sets the scene, tracing a shift in the study of the relationship between science and religion towards a growing recognition of complexity and global perspectives, albeit in a patchy way across the varied disciplines of history and social and behavioural sciences. The conclusion drawn is that the conflict between science and religion is not to be viewed as primarily epistemic, but rather as being motivated by social, cultural, or identity-based drivers, which this research sets out to interrogate in more detail. Chapter 3 explores a 'theme of entanglement' to demonstrate that historical relations between science and religion have been complexified by other historical developments such as colonial-

ism which continue to shape experiences today. In particular a bias towards the 'superiority' of Western scientific ideas can lead to a marginalisation of indigenous, non-Western knowledge.

In order to explore 'international' perspectives, the research itself took place in Argentina, Australia, Germany, Spain, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom and USA. Part 2 of the book devotes a chapter each to the findings of the research in these countries respectively. It is here that the book becomes somewhat heavy-going in this reviewer's opinion. Each chapter has a different author, there is a good deal of overlap and repetition in the findings, but these are not always presented in an entirely consistent way. Some chapters lean towards an interpretive approach, where others are content to present data and especially verbatim quotes without much in the way of comment. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of data here, and for anyone wanting to understand the cultural context of one of these countries, closer study will be well rewarded. Some wider themes do emerge however, particularly the sense that the UK and the USA may be outliers in having a relatively strong attachment to the conflict thesis, whereas in other contexts 'there is very little public contestation between the two fields [...] it is often hard even to mark out 'science' and 'religion' as distinct fields'(147).

Part 3 moves towards Cross-Cultural Analysis of the research findings. A number of helpful graphs are included which aid digestion of the large amount of data provided. One important conclusion drawn is that 'conflict' between science and religion 'is not predominantly located in the beliefs or worldviews of individuals who identify as religious or spiritual [it is instead] socially projected [on] *other people's beliefs or worldviews [based on preconceptions].'* (206).

Part 4 suggests some new horizons for future research with chapter 12 reflecting on the methodology of the project and recognising that part of the complexity lies in understanding how religion 'functions both as a belief system and as a social identity' (210). The importance of social identity seems to hold across contexts, though the exact nature of these identities may be culturally unique. The concept of 'cognitive polyphasia' is also helpful in understanding 'that the same individuals use both natural and supernatural explanations to interpret the very same events and that there are multiple ways in which both kinds of explanations coexist in individual minds' (238).

Chapter 14 gives a fascinating exploration of the phenomenon of 'Scienceyy-Spirituality' in an Australian context looking at how the relatively recent rise in conspiracy based spiritualities, vaccine scepticism, and eco-anxiety concerns operate at the interface of science and religion.

The book's concluding 'Coda' says that we may better understand 'science and religion not as abstract knowledge systems but as facets of individual or group lived experience and identities, which are deeply embedded in their social, cultural, and political contexts' (261).

The continued promotion of a 'conflict' thesis, especially through the algorithms of social media, is an important drive in the rise of disinformation that we are experiencing in a post-truth age. This has important implications for public policy. Furthermore, outdated and stereotypical ideas about others based on their religious identity, may be excluding religious individuals from fruitful academic and scientific careers.

Overall, the book presents some vitally important findings and reflections regarding the complex interface between science and religion. It is recommended for anyone seeking a robust research-

based understanding of this intersection.

The high purchase price of academic books like this is well-recognised, so it is very generous of the editors and publishers to make this work freely available as a downloadable PDF from https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003476580 or as a Kindle version from Amazon https://amzn.eu/d/09JROUYa ; e-book available for free under a CC-BY-NC-ND license.

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Neils Arboel

The Wonders of Creation: The Most Famous Christian Biologists in History

Copenhagen, Queenswood, 2025. 507 pp, hb. £28.21. ISBN 9788791519895

Let me go back a few months, to early October 2025. With my friend Graham Swinerd, I was at Lee Abbey in North Devon, leading a course on Science and Faith (see www.bigbangtobiology.net/blog October 2025). Jane Goodall had died just a few days earlier; I thought it appropriate to briefly mention her and to tell our audience that she regarded her work, both with chimpanzees and in environmental campaigning, as fulfilling God's calling on her life. She was a devoted biologist who's work and faith were completely integrated.

This then leads me to talk specifically about the book. The title and subtitle make it look, at a cursory reading, as if Christian Biologists are wonders of creation – well, perhaps we are, along with all other living things, but I presume that the title means that the Christian Biologists have been working on the Wonders of Creation. The twenty biologists whom the author selected, range from Francesco Redi in the 17th century to several 20th and 21st century scientists, including Jane Goodall and, of especial interest to readers of this journal, Francis Collins and Simon Conway Morris. And, although the author regards his selection as being the most famous, I must confess that I had not previously heard of Redi, who is credited with carrying out the first controlled experiments in Biology.

In essence, the book is a series of short biographies each of which describes and discusses the scientific work and the faith of a particular scientist and goes on to show how each of them integrated their faith with their science. The main text is preceded by an Introduction on Science and Religion and is followed by an epilogue on Overcoming the conflicts of the past. I need to say that for some of the subjects, such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Alister Hardy, their faith was far from 'orthodox' but nevertheless was a driving force in their lives. So, let me pick a few examples from what is overall, a very interesting and informative book. My first example is Alister Hardy, whose two-volume *The Open Sea* I read in my last year at school. I did not know then that he had a religious belief, although that fact became much more publicly known later in his career. Thus, it was especially interesting to read that, early in his career, he had made a vow to God to show that science and faith were completely compatible, a vow partially fulfilled by his work on the evolution of religion. Another book I read while still at school was the then-current edition of David Lack's *The Life of the Robin* and, although my career has been in biochemistry/molecular biology, I continued to take an interest in his work. However, at no point had I realised that he was a Christian and thus his chapter in this book added something to my appreciation of that work. The same is true for me of Alexander Fleming who, like Jane Goodall (see above), stated that in his work he was following God's will for his life.

I hope those brief examples give

something of the 'flavour' of this book of which I am very pleased to own a copy. Every chapter is interesting, informative, helpful and even encouraging. I am very happy to recommend it to readers of this journal.

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Dawn Lewis Sutherland

From Babel to AI: Idolatry, Transhumanism, and the Crisis of Imago Dei

Wipf and Stock 2025, pb 262 pp. £24, ISBN 9798385241804

What is the relationship between artificial intelligence, transhumanism, and idolatry? In *From Babel to AI,* Dawn Lewis Sutherland draws a line through these topics by focusing on the *imago Dei,* or the image of God in man. The contrast between the two views of the human person is summarized in the book like this 'In contrast to transhumanism's emphasis on autonomy and individual enhancement, Christian theology centres on relationality as an essential element of human identity. Theological anthropology, particularly the doctrine of the imago Dei, holds that human identity is not self-constructed but divinely bestowed, reflecting God's nature and sovereignty' (8).

Sutherland argues the direction of artificial intelligence and transhumanism draw humanity towards autonomy via self-enhancement, and hence away from God's original purpose. Thus, transhumanism and artificial intelligence, by refocusing humanity on itself, becomes – or at the very least echoes the goals and methods of – idolatry.

The second chapter offers a well-argued view of the image of God. Each of the three aspects the author proposes as elements of the *imago Dei* are drawn out of Genesis 1:26–27, early Christian theologians, and post-Reformation theologians. This chapter also considers the restoration of the image of God through the act of salvation, using Colossians 1:15 and Romans 8:29 as keystones.

The author focuses on three aspects of the image of God: dignity, relationship, and moral responsibility. She considers each of these areas in depth through the lens of technological idolatry, divine boundaries, the quest for immortality, and the quest for salvation. Sutherland does not suggest abandoning these technologies, but rather asserts we can find ways to enhance dignity, relationship, and moral responsibility through them.

The primary weakness of this argument is that many readers will not accept the author's understanding of the *imago Dei,* no matter how well her case is argued. Failing to accept this argument, however, undermines the remainder of the work.

The third and fifth chapters explore the relationship between technology more broadly, and artificial intelligence more specifically, and idolatry. How does the human quest for technology result in 'a god of our own making?' The overarching message of these chapters is that God's limits on mankind via nature are loving and good, and humanity risks causing great damage by trying to overcome these limits. These chapters can be summed up (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) by remembering: 'If I had all of God's power, a lot of things would change. If I had all of God's wisdom, though, things would remain just as they are.'

The sixth and seventh chapters consider the relationship between the quest for immortal existence and salvation.

The argument to boundaries across the fourth and sixth chapters is one of

the strongest in the book. Sutherland's argument well-defined, well-supported, and convincing. It is refreshing to see an author handle this rare line of argument when considering technology and the person so well.

The first and final chapters make a case for a balanced view of technology. In short, these technologies should be shaped so they remain tools in the hands of humans, rather than tools one human can use to treat other humans with something less than their God-given dignity. These chapters present a balanced and nuanced view of artificial intelligence and transhumanism, in particular.

I can express the primary weakness of these chapters as this: Sutherland does not see how they would be reflected by the media, the interaction well described in Postman's theory of *resonance* in media (Postman and Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*). It may be that the resonance of these technologies precludes their widespread use in anything other than ultimately harmful ways.

Overall, Sutherland has presented, in this book, an excellent set of arguments about the dangers of artificial intelligence and transhumanism, transcending the ongoing technical arguments by considering very human considerations. This book is highly recommended for those studying these topics, or who want to understand human dignity in the light of technology more fully.

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Jens Zimmermann (ed.)

Human Flourishing in a Technological World: A Theological Perspective

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 356 pp. ISBN 9780192844019

Jens Zimmermann's *Human Flourishing in a Technological World* is a collection of fifteen essays from scholars concerned about 'the formative influence of technology on human self-understanding and… human identity' (1). That technology is indeed *formative* – despite (or precisely because of) our temptation to become 'passive users' unburdened by self-discipline and critical caution (3) – Zimmermann aptly demonstrates in his introduction, citing great thinkers such as Michael Polanyi, Martin Heiddeger, and Michal Henry. The very 'experiential lens' of humanity has become a 'merger of the scientific worldview with modern technology', and the resulting 'technovision of human life' is troubling (10) – it is what Christians traditionally recognize as idolatry (6). Thus, the purpose of this book is 'to explore what this ongoing technologization teaches us about the human condition' and 'to point out how uncritically embracing technology *impoverishes*… our expectations for human flourishing' (11).

The book is divided into three parts. Part I attempts an intellectual and historical analysis of modern anthropology (e.g., transhumanism), answering questions such as how uploading one's mind to a machine becomes at all imaginable. The opening chapter, Robert Doede's 'From Living Souls to Software Selves' provides our overall theoretical framework (19); he traces the development of our Western metaphysical narrative from the enchanted Greek cosmos to the rise of mechanistic science and then to a kind of re-enchantment as Descartes' mechanical framework is further adapted into 'a purely *informational framework*' (45). Part II showcases the power of modern technology over particular areas of human life, spanning ethics, psychiatry, work, education, disability, aging, and death. Part III features an essay from and

a dialogue with Jaron Lanier, who may be considered a major leader of the recent digital revolution.

There is a great diversity of illuminating topics and a proper balance between theoretical and practical approaches. All chapters are well-researched and well-written, making this book an essential reference for anyone sharing the authors' concerns. The book does not say much about some pressing issues of AI (e.g., is it truly 'safe' if it knows when it is being tested and will behave differently) – this is my only disappointment but it may be a blessing for other readers. Thanks to the size of Zimmermann's project, I must be very selective in this review. Below, I will highlight three chapters which stand out to me, one from each part.

In Chapter 4, 'The Icon and the Idol: A Christian Perspective on Sociable Robots', Jordan Wales asks whether robots can glorify God (94). Of course, the so-called sociable AI can display humanlike behaviours – perhaps with considerable accuracy – but whether this makes it truly 'sociable' is a matter of debate. Wales offers us an unusual approach based on ancient and medieval Christian accounts of humanoid automata. Informed by the doctrine of the Trintiy, the author first introduces personhood as 'a relational subject capable of self-gift' (95, 99-101). He then contrasts between 'the robot as icon of the personal' (105), where an artifact is crafted to invite the audience to see beyond itself (e.g., an automaton that welcomes, prepares, and leads guests into a noble court), and 'the robot as idolatrous substitute for the personal' (107), where the machine becomes yet another instrument to satisfy one's own pride (e.g., a robot that replaces a real woman). Thus, though robots cannot worship like humans, it is possible to build a praying (or thanksgiving) robot as an icon extending our gaze toward God (113).

In Chapter 9, 'Leisure in a Technological World', Clark Elliston argues that 'a concern for genuine leisure is intrinsic to human being' and thus its practice becomes 'a resistance against technological cultures in which production… dominates human lives' (190). In today's culture of total work, 'the entire concept of leisure has become fundamentally unintelligible'; what passes for 'leisure' is really a distraction (195). The author briefly explains how this came to be: after the traditional institutions of meaning collapsed, work has been elevated into the means to actualize our individual will. Then, drawing heavily from Josef Pieper's *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Elliston attempts to recover genuine leisure by highlighting its main features (i.e., receptivity, generosity, humility) with the example of friendship – friendship with other humans and, ultimately, friendship with God.

In Chapter 14, 'Personhood and Human Flourishing in a Technological World', Jaron Lanier (a founder of virtual reality) debunks the familiar 'superintelligent AI will replace us humans' as a myth spun by programmers in order to get funding – by tech companies in order to make money (295). The question that matters is not whether a machine can become conscious – that, according to Lanier, we can never know except by 'faith' (302) – but how to protect the average worker's rights to one's own work. As opposed to a company analysing how we work and then making robots to replace us, the author envisions a 'data union' (like a labour union) where human workers are consulted to improve automation while receiving royalties as shareholders in AI technology (298). Then humans and robots can perhaps work cooperatively rather than competitively – provided that we demystify AI and re-personalize ourselves, which Lanier reiterates in the following chapter (305). Thus, Lanier

provides us with an optimistic ending to the book.

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Luke Bretherton

A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well

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Bretherton's book is a timely and significant contribution to the field of ethics and political theology, giving the reader a comprehensive vision of Christian moral life grounded in theological anthropology oriented towards the formation of a just and loving common life.

Echoes of his earlier work in political theology abound, particularly in his rejection of the autonomous human individual in favour of a relational and interdependent theological anthropology. He makes a formidable case that this is non-negotiable for our survival because human lives are always embedded within social, political, economic and ecological relationships. Flourishing is therefore more than individual wellbeing; it means participation in 'a just and loving common life' (322). This conviction shapes the book's three-part structure: What is going on? What is to be done? How do we live together?

The first section places discernment at the heart of ethics, describing it in terms of listening. Bretherton identifies five dimensions of listening: creation, Scripture, strangers, cries for liberation, and ancestors. The conversion of the soul cannot be separated from the cultivation of the soil, making attentiveness to social and ecological conditions essential. Scripture forms a community capable of discernment rather than functioning as a source of rule-based prescriptions. Drawing on Simone Weil and care ethics, Bretherton contends that moral life requires responsiveness to those beyond our immediate circles. Ethical action cannot proceed from abstract assumptions about what others need but must emerge from engagement with the realities of their lives. Likewise, Christians must listen to cries for liberation, examining both the ways theology contests domination and the ways it has reinforced it. Discernment therefore involves identifying and resisting structures that privilege some while disadvantaging others. Finally, tradition is understood as accumulated wisdom through which communities learn how to live. To be a good ancestor is to participate in an intergenerational covenant of care and love linking past, present and future generations (124).

The second section addresses what Christians should do. Bretherton advocates a 'mixed economy' integrating divine commands, deontology and virtue ethics. Acknowledging human finitude and fallenness, he presents a realistic account of life in a world marked by systemic sin, tragic choices and conflicting goods. Social structures and technologies can develop dynamics that exceed individual control. Money, the state and even 'big data' acquire forms of power that shape human action in significant ways. Yet the picture is not bleak. Divine commands are presented as liberating conditions for flourishing rather than restrictions on freedom. Drawing on Barth and Bonhoeffer, Bretherton argues that moral agency emerges within a covenantal relationship of divine call and human response. Rules help interpret these commands, but virtue remains central because it cultivates the habits needed for communion with God and creation. Drawing on James Cone, he insists that

the powerful cannot determine what counts as virtue in situations of oppression. Consequently, questions of virtue cannot be separated from questions of justice and social structure. As he puts it, 'We come to an ever-deepening understanding of what the good life is by participating in it through the exercise of virtue' (205). Virtue, commands and rules ultimately converge in practical reasoning, generating wisdom for action amid fallenness and finitude.

In the final part, Bretherton reflects on Christian witness through the lenses of intimacy, work and politics. His account of intimacy extends beyond romantic relationships to encompass broader forms of mutuality and covenantal faithfulness. A chapter on work critiques the prioritisation of economic productivity and proposes instead a solidarity economy that enhances social and political agency. The discussion culminates in an account of politics as the practice of forming and sustaining common life. Politics is not merely statecraft but the collective work of determining how people live together amid disagreement and difference. Bretherton's vision operates through apocalyptic, tragic and pastoral registers, recognising the world's brokenness while remaining attentive to ordinary realities. Neighbour love becomes the basis of political life and of restoring the ability of all persons to flourish as creatures.

This is a genuinely relational and theocentric vision that critiques the nature-culture divide and demonstrates how human flourishing is inseparable from ecological wellbeing. The focus on economics is particularly welcome. There is also considerable overlap with recent Christian Indigenous theology, especially in Bretherton's 'metabolic' understanding of agency and the imago Dei. However, given these resonances, the book might have engaged with Indigenous perspectives more directly. Bretherton appears reluctant to frame neighbour love as kinship, yet at times he seems close to such a model when he writes that 'to be a creature is to be someone who needs a common life with human and nonhuman others to survive, let alone thrive' (340). How nonhuman participants might reshape political membership remains unclear.

In summary, Bretherton offers a compelling account of what it means for Christians to speak and act faithfully in the world. The book provides a rigorous and systematic response to an increasingly polarised context and gives us a thoughtful alternative to the competing pressures of religious populism and secularism.

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Ronald Cole-Turner

Psychedelics and Christian Spirituality: Exploring an Unexpected Pathway to Healing and Spirituality

Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2025. 146 pp. pb. £16.31, ISBN 9781666778991

In a study evaluating mystical experiences with the psychedelic agent psilocybin (from 'magic mushrooms'), 22 out of 36 subjects had what they described as a profound mystical experience after taking the drug, with 67% describing it as their 'single most meaningful life experience.' (*Griffiths RR, Richards WA, McCann U, Jesse R. Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance. Psychopharmacology. 2006; 187(3): 268-83.*). This raises the question: do psychedelic agents have any place in the practice of Christian spirituality and should churches advocate their use? This short book gives a preliminary response to this question.

In the foreword, the controversial psychedelic spirituality advocate, Hunt Priest, enthuses about how western society is on the brink of a 'spiritual, religious, psychological and medical reformation' and that the church needs to address this issue with spiritual and theological urgency. With phrases like 'the church can engage or get out of the way', Priest's introduction is reckless and provocative. Thankfully, Cole-Turner himself takes a more measured and careful approach. Cole-Turner, known for his theological engagement with futuristic medical technologies, is well qualified to write on this subject. The debate explored here is that the use of psychedelic drugs in Christian spirituality may be beneficial for human flourishing, but their use may be problematic for mainstream churches because these drugs are illegal, they have significant risks and are perceived as countercultural.

The opening chapter describes the history of psychedelic drug use, outlining the spiritual implications of their use, and discussing their risks, and Cole-Turner rightly highlights the risk of premature decriminalisation. Chapter 2 discusses the renewed therapeutic interest in psychedelics, describing evidence for potential clinical benefits in disorders such as resistant depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and various other conditions such as substance misuse and Alzheimer's disease. Cole-Turner argues that, if psychedelics become widely used therapeutically for these conditions, churches should still be interested in them because of their implications for pastoral care.

Chapter 3 explores the ways in which psychedelics act on the human brain – their effects on neurotransmitters, neurone growth and brain networks (impact on sense of self), and psychological flexibility (openness of beliefs) – and importantly he acknowledges the varied attitudes that scientists have towards the idea of 'spiritual' phenomena. In Chapter 4, Cole-Turner moves from psychopharmacology to spirituality as he attempts to define a 'spiritual experience', drawing on classifications by Yaden and Newberg. He rightly draws the reader's attention to various confounding factors in this task, such as the difficulties in describing such experiences objectively, and identifying common features, and the fact that transcultural approaches are problematic for religious scholars.

Chapter 5 describes the complex and contested relationship between mysticism and Christian theology in church history, and notes that this uneasy relationship may contribute to the church's wariness about religious use of psychedelics. Chapter 6 then develops a theology of spiritual experience. Cole-Turner concludes that, if the therapeutic use of psychedelics becomes commonplace, the question of whether psychedelics have a place in Christian spirituality will be an important emerging issue for churches, and churches will need to understand this and be better informed about these drugs.

Insightful though it is, this book does not constitute a thoroughgoing theological treatment of psychedelics. Further work is needed to fully understand the various confounding factors in the psychedelics and spirituality conversation, such as the classification of spiritual experiences and scientific attitudes to spirituality. Also, from a methodological perspective, the scientific evidence admitted could be more focused; in Chapter 2, studies for various therapeutic indications are cited, whereas a focus on resistant depression might have been better, as there are more robust clinical trials available for this indication.

Even in conditions where there may be therapeutic benefits, psychedelics are a high-risk form of treatment. Neverthe-

less, if they do receive regulatory approval for therapeutic use, their use will become more widespread, and questions about the impact of psychedelics on spirituality will become more pressing for churches and theologians.

This short volume is therefore a timely introduction to this debate.

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