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# Pro Rege

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Volume 19 | Number 2

Article 5

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December 1990

## God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science (Book Review)

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### Recommended Citation

Jongsma, Calvin (1990) "God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 19: No. 2, 29 - 31.  
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*God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science*, edited by David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1986. xi + 516 pp. Paperback \$18.95. Reviewed by Calvin Jongsma, Professor of Mathematics.

Christianity and natural science are inescapably opposed to one another. So argued John William Draper almost a century and a quarter ago in his influential work *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*. This outlook found scholarly support and expression around the turn of the century in *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, Andrew Dickson White's historical documentation of past conflicts. Many leading twentieth century thinkers in science, philosophy, and history concurred with their thesis: the history of modern science is one of progressive emancipation from the restrictive shackles of religion and metaphysics. Thus was born the myth that free scientific inquiry is incompatible with the Christian religion.

In 1938 Robert K. Merton countered this view with what has come to be known as the "Merton Thesis." Merton noted that while medieval Christians may have degraded the experimental study of nature, English Puritans highly valued and promoted it. They saw science as the study of God's handiwork, as a way in which people could praise their Maker. So rather than being hostile toward science, Puritans actively encouraged it.

Merton's approach found both proponents and adversaries. Those taking a more strictly internalist view of the history of science found little relevance in his sociological analysis. Science, for them, dealt with empirical facts and theories; social status and extra-scientific beliefs were irrelevant.

Those who were sympathetic to Merton's point of view sometimes went beyond his conclusions, seeing a causal relation between religious ideas and scientific advancement. Reijer Hooykaas, for example, argued in *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (1972) that Protestant Christianity was responsible for the birth and early progress of modern science. This same outlook is extended to other time periods by Colin Russell in his book *Cross-Currents: Interactions Between Science and Faith* (1985).

We thus have had in this century both War and Peace advanced as metaphors for the history of the relationship between Christianity and natural science. Professional historians of science today are loath to adopt either one of them as the correct image; both interpretations tend toward apologetics and fail to take into account the full historical record.

The narratives of Draper and White are far from unbiased and played important roles in their own personal

conflict with religious authorities, Draper with the Roman Catholic Church, and White with those who opposed the secularism promoted at Cornell University, where he was President. On the other hand, those who credit Calvinism or Protestant Christianity generally with the genesis of science do not adequately explain the conflicts that have occasionally arisen; nor do they acknowledge and describe the pivotal roles played in the scientific revolution by Catholics such as Galileo, Pascal, Mersenne, and Descartes.

It is now apparent to historians of science that the relationship between Christianity and science is complex. To view the relation primarily in terms of antagonism or alliance is far too simplistic. Not all Christians have understood and appreciated scientific theories, to say the least; but incidents often interpreted as conflicts between Christianity and science turn out to be something quite different when investigated at close range. The picture of religious fanatics, threatened by any novel idea, actively persecuting innocent scientists objectively pursuing truth wherever it may lead them, is more fantasy than fact. Ecclesiastics and scientists are usually both party to such disputes, which may have little to do with balancing scientific claims against theological doctrines. Even when Christian spokespersons are battling scientists, this does not necessarily imply that Christian doctrines are at odds with scientific ideas. Nor does the friendly relation between two parties indicate a true harmony between a given scientific theory and various doctrines. It is thus important to explore and present all aspects of such conflicts as clearly as possible when they occur. Conflicts should not be minimized or ignored, but neither should they be exaggerated or misconstrued.

To decide how to show this newer, more complex picture of the relationship between Christianity and natural science to the general public, a number of internationally recognized historians of science and of the church gathered at the University of Wisconsin for a working conference about ten years ago. The result of their discussions is the book now under review, edited by Lindberg and Numbers.

*God and Nature* contains eighteen articles written by as many experts on all aspects of the issue. It has been carefully edited to make it attractive and accessible to a broad audience. No assumption is made regarding the reader's familiarity with the history of the topics being treated. How much each reader will gain from the book naturally depends upon prior acquaintance

with the issues, but one does not need to be an expert in science, theology, or their histories to follow the arguments. For those who wish to delve further into any of the given topics, a twelve page annotated list of further works is appended after the articles.

It is difficult to do much more than summarize a book having the historical breadth and depth this one has. *God and Nature* treats different historical eras, different areas of natural science, and different trends in theology. The two opening articles treat the early and the medieval church. While noting that some leading churchmen disapproved of pagan scholarship, the authors point out that no single position on the relation between Jerusalem and Athens was achieved.

The next six articles focus on the scientific revolution, beginning with Copernicus and ending with Newton. These articles look at Catholic and Protestant responses to developments in science, and they also indicate scientific developments that have certain affinities for theological positions. William Shea reevaluates Galileo's condemnation by the Catholic Church in the light of what is now known about the times. He shows this incident to be something other than bigoted ecclesiastics simply suppressing scientific thought. Gary Deason gives a fascinating analysis of the possible connections between the rise of the mechanistic worldview in the seventeenth century and the Reformers' doctrine of the sovereignty of God: matter is inanimate and ruled by the law of God, not by occult forces residing within. Charles Webster notes that while it may be difficult to hone the "Merton Thesis" to complete precision, this should not blind us to the fact that Puritan scientists were definitely motivated in their work by their religious beliefs.

Five articles then discuss the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Included here are articles on the Newtonian worldview and Deism, on the mechanistic view of life, and on the rise of a theory of earth history and geology. Martin Rudwick argues that debates over the origin of the earth and its relation to the biblical record are primarily debates between differing cosmologies, not between the Bible and science. James Moore approaches science as social history, treating geological debates in the nineteenth century as part of the evolving professionalization of the field.

The last five articles discuss developments since the middle of the nineteenth century and bring us up to the present. Issues touched on here include biological evolution, Creationism, physical cosmology, and the changing landscape of Christian theology. Two articles explain various Christian reactions to Darwinian evolution, showing that the debate over evolution was not

merely one of evolutionary science versus the Bible. There were both scientists and ecclesiastics in favor of evolution, and also both were against it, and for various reasons. Ronald Numbers' article surveys the rise of Creationism in twentieth century North America, showing the shifts in outlook and tactics among the participants. Erwin Hiebert points out how developments in physics since the mid-nineteenth century (thermodynamics, theory of relativity) have been interpreted in religious terms in order both to defend and to attack Christianity. The book closes with an article discussing reactions to natural science in general by various neo-orthodox and orthodox Christians.

From my point of view *God and Nature* has one major deficiency and that relates to its strictly historical approach. By tacitly viewing Christianity and science in operational terms (at any given time, Christian doctrine is what Christians believe; science is what scientists do), the reader lacks a final touchstone by which to evaluate developments and judge the relationships between Christianity and science.

I know I will be reminded that no one definition covers all times and cases, but because the book fails to address this point in any systematic way, no judgment can be made about whether a given conflict (or lack of conflict) may possibly be due to some non-essential feature of Christianity or to Christianity having compromised its basic position. Religion and science are simply seen as separate bodies of attitudes and knowledge, as mutual factors exercising influence upon one another. No structural analysis of the nature of religion and science is offered that would guide one in evaluating their interconnections.

If all there is is changing history without abiding norms or "intrinsic natures," my concern would be misguided, but I believe otherwise and would like to see such an approach attempted that still does full justice to the historical record. The reformational perspective offered at Dordt College should equip one to demonstrate that conflicts between Christianity and science are not that at all, though they are often construed as such, even by the combatants. They are instead basically conflicts between differing operant worldviews, both fundamentally religious, and not between religion and science.

While maintaining my criticism, I nevertheless greatly appreciate the authoritative discussion of the history of the relation between Christianity and natural science that *God and Nature* provides. No reader will be equally pleased by all the articles; I found some more interesting and better argued than others. But the book as a whole is well worth the price. This work

will be a prime entry-level source book for anyone interested in exploring the issue further. Those concerned with developing a Christian approach to natural science

would do well to read it carefully and learn from the history and tradition that is ours as Christians and scientists.

*God Meant it for Good: The Covenant and the Church Today*, by Ted Hoogsteen (Burlington, Ontario, Canada: Welch Publishing) 1989. 99 pp. Paperback \$12.95 (Canadian). Reviewed by Gerald W. Vander Hoek, Assistant Professor of Theology.

This book examines the Jacob cycle in Genesis 37-50. After two introductory chapters, Hoogsteen devotes one chapter for each chapter in this section of Genesis. The primary theme of *God Meant it for Good* (hereinafter *GMFG*), could be stated as follows: as God ruled for the good of his covenant purpose and people during a troublesome period in covenant history, so he rules today in a similarly perplexing age. Hoogsteen, I might note, is pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church of Brantford, Ontario.

The greatest strength of *GMFG* is its theocentric reading of the Genesis narrative. In contrast to a moralistic reading which focuses on human characters, this book keeps the reader's eyes focused on God who is working often with characters who are in no way exemplars. Genesis 50:20, which is echoed in *GMFG*'s title, demands a theocentric interpretation.

But there are two serious weaknesses in *GMFG*. First, Hoogsteen closely associates the covenant and a double decretal predestination. The covenant is apparently understood as the Lord's tool to save some and pass by others (see 12, 63, etc.). Such an understanding seems to be the basis for Hoogsteen's repeated assertions that the Lord pushed the Egyptians away from himself. Furthermore, according to Hoogsteen, the primary purpose of the Old Testament covenant was to form a separate people from whom the Messiah would be born (e.g., 12-13, 52). Separation is understood as what I would call isolationism.

This understanding of the covenant is inadequate. On the one hand, it fails to distinguish between election in a salvific and individual sense and God's election of a people as a people. Paul was merely echoing Old Testament teaching when he said that not all Israel is Israel (Romans 9:6). On the other hand, the idea that the covenant is a tool for reprobation cannot be substantiated by Genesis 37-50 or elsewhere from Scripture. More seriously, it flies in the face of the covenant's missionary purpose. The mission of the Old Testament people of God was not merely to be separate and to have babies until the Messiah was born. God chose Israel, not to damn other nations, but to shape Israel into his tool to address the nations (Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 12:8, 19:4-6).

A second weakness in *GMFG* is its tendency to assert

points rather than demonstrate them from the text of Scripture. While the connection between Scripture and Hoogsteen's points are clear in some chapters (e.g., ch. 4), in many places I was left wondering about the basis for the author's claims. Hoogsteen, for example, sees a movement from Jacob's and his family's covenant unfaithfulness to faithfulness in Genesis 37-50. The evidence for the unfaithfulness is shown clearly by Hoogsteen (e.g., Genesis 38). But Hoogsteen's claims for the final unity in Jacob's family and sanctification of individual members, which are crucial for his book, need to be more fully supported. Does the fact, for example, that five of the brothers in Genesis 47:2 went to ask Pharaoh for Goshen really show a covenantal "singleness" or "unity in thought" (76)? If such is intended by the narrative, I would like to be shown that it is so from the text.

Similar examples of questionable claims are numerous. For example, Hoogsteen claims that Joseph's sending of the Egyptians out of his house before he made himself known to his brothers (Genesis 45:2) shows that "the revelation of the mercy of the Lord could not be spoiled by the presence of unbelievers" (65). Hoogsteen adopts a dubious reading of "Shiloh" in Genesis 49:10 without justifying his repeated use of it for two chapters (87-98). He repeatedly calls Genesis a chronicle and consistently avoids the traditional classification of narrative. This departure from tradition is never explained.

At times, what appears to dictate the book's agenda is Hoogsteen's vision of the church. For example, the discussion moves from the dictator Pharaoh to the dangers of bureaucracy and pluralism (69-70). God's general providence allegedly "grants no insight into the 'how' and 'where' " God leads people (63). One of the first indications of God's grace is that his people "think alike on great and minor issues" (53).

In short, *GMFG* would be greatly improved with a more careful exegesis of Genesis 37-50 to justify the author's views and a more biblical understanding of the covenant. Nevertheless, with my criticisms in mind, I would recommend *GMFG* for pastors and serious students of Genesis 37-50. The theocentric interpretation of the narrative makes the book worth reading.