

2000

BOOK REVIEW: A Review of God and Contemporary Science, by Philip Clayton

Lewis S. Ford

Old Dominion University, LSFord0@cs.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr>

 Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ford, Lewis S. (2000) "BOOK REVIEW: A Review of God and Contemporary Science, by Philip Clayton," *Journal for Christian Theological Research*: Vol. 5 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr/vol5/iss2000/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal for Christian Theological Research by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact akeck001@luthersem.edu.

Lewis S. Ford, "A Review of *God and Contemporary Science*, by Philip Clayton," [Journal for Christian Theological Research](http://apu.edu/~CTRF/articles/2000_articles/ford.html) [http://apu.edu/~CTRF/articles/2000_articles/ford.html] 5:4 (2000).

BOOK REVIEW:

A Review of *God and Contemporary Science*, by Philip Clayton

[Lewis S. Ford](#)

Old Dominion University, Emeritus

Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*. *Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997. \$25.00. 274 pp.

1. Clayton surveys impartially the relevant literature on the contemporary interaction of theology and science, concentrating particularly on the issue of divine activity in the world, concluding with his own proposal in the final chapter. This book would make an excellent text for a "science and religion" course. After a discussion of the present postmodern context, he presents Biblical and Christian theology as it pertains to creation, and then examines contemporary scientific cosmology as relevant to theology. The concluding chapters consider the presumption of naturalism in these investigations, and examine the ways in which quantum uncertainty enhanced by chaos theory can be utilized for understanding divine action. Clayton argues that while this can provide a necessary basis for divine action, it is not sufficient, and should be supplemented by the analogy of mental influence. In terms of panentheism, God may influence the world the way in which the mind influences the body.

2. The panentheists he identifies are such as Moltmann, McFague, and Jantzen (p. 242), perhaps also Peacocke. Hartshorne, who more than anyone else popularized the term, is not mentioned, for good reason, since his brand of panentheism has unwelcome implications. Hartshorne's rationalism may appear to be too uncompromising in this postmodernist age. Instead of trying to deduce theology from universal principles, we are urged to extrapolate from the particularities of the Christian faith, recognizing that this need not exclude the particularities of other approaches. This seems to mean that metaphysics should not be the master, but should be the handmaiden to theology and science, universalizing from its particularities.

3. A test case here is *creatio ex nihilo*. Hartshorne's panentheism requires that God and the world be co-everlasting, while most theology can agree with those cosmologists who see in the Big Bang the absolute beginning of the universe. Here Clayton sides with *creatio ex nihilo*. He recognizes that the Old Testament does not strictly assert that the world was created out of nothing, but "eventually it became clear that the logic of monotheism actually required that God be understood as the origin of matter as well" (p. 86). (What functions as other than God for Hartshorne are free acts, which go back all the way.)

4. The causal regress, that every cause has a cause, is perhaps the least important reason for asserting the everlastingness of the world, particularly since it seems to be called into question in cases of singularity. But *creatio ex nihilo* requires omnipotence, which process philosophy questions. Divinely perfect power, in its view, must be persuasive. Persuasion is found in the Bible in its authoritative mode as command. This is not effective, however, unless there is that which is capable of responding.

5. Traditional theism has been comfortable with the idea of God alone. It assumes that perfection means completeness, so that God is perfectly complete without any world. If, however, divine perfection is such as to involve further enrichment, then God alone would be impoverished. Some world, that is, something other which could enrich God would always be required.

6. Modern metaphysics has been fallibilistic for the past century, including Hartshorne and Whitehead. It means to be amenable to the evidence, but how the evidence should be interpreted remains a problem. It may well be that the postmodern demand that metaphysics arise out of more specialized disciplines means that process thought should be revised with respect to the origin of the world. My only point here is that such modification would not be easy without abandoning important insights.

7. Can Clayton's form of panentheism escape these difficulties? Basically it claims that the world is God's body. He argues that a top-down analogy in terms of mind and body must supplement the bottom-up approaches of Peacocke, Murphy, et al. He examines various forms of supervenience theory, opting for a "weak" version, in which the mind is dependent on the body, but where the mind can also influence the body. Emergent supervenience argues that mental properties are emergent but also ontologically distinct from their physical substrate. They can exercise a causal influence of their own, and they require explanatory disciplines appropriate to their own level of reality: the social sciences.

8. If we press the analogy hard, this means that God's existence should depend on the world as the mind depends upon the body. How then can God be around to create the world? Also, how does God affect us? All we know for certain is that it is not by ordinary physical causation. What does mental causation consist of? Process thought argues that it is basically persuasive, and depends for its effectiveness upon that which is capable of responding to such persuasion. This may be mentality; only that which is capable of **being affected by possibly** could be open to persuasion. Instead of mentality being emergent from that which is purely physical, mentality may be required for the emergence of any actuality, if divine influence is operative in the process. If so, the possibility of mentality, at least, must be present all the way down.

9. Moreover, if the mental is somehow emergent from the physical, it would seem that God would have to be emergent from the world. Clayton addresses this question, although all too briefly: The issue at hand - does God essentially depend on the universe, or is he in some sense **independent of it**? - is a paradigmatic case of a transempirical question. Nothing within the world could dictate the answer to this question, since nothing within the world could determine whether its source is essentially independent of it." Here the reason for the disanalogy of God and world must be a theological (or metaphysical) one: "God's being, and any qualities that accompany it as part of God's eternal nature, precede the set of experiences that God might have within the world."

10. Is this an adequate response, growing out of the particularities of the theological tradition? Transempirical issues are also metaphysical ones, and here the questions are highly controverted. Clayton espouses a panentheistic model to explain God's activity in the world within the context of contemporary science. It would also seem necessary to embed that model within a larger metaphysics.

CTRF@apu.edu

©2000