

# SCIENCE AND RELIGION AND THE MYTH OF THEIR CONFLICT

Peter Harrison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ISBN – 10: 0521712513, ISBN – 13: 9780521712514, pp. 322.

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The scholarly but also the public interest in the relationship between science and religion has registered a remarkable increase in the last years. The *Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion* is meant to be a solid introduction to the historical, philosophical and scientific aspects of this connection. The fourteen essays of the book deal with religion as understood in western Christianity and their common aim is to argue against the myth that science and religion are in conflict. The “conflict myth,” mostly advanced in the nineteenth century by the works of John Draper<sup>1</sup> and Andrew Dickson White,<sup>2</sup> is denounced here as “erroneous.” The first set of arguments for this, corresponding to the first part of the book, draws on the historical evidence for the peaceful coexistence of the two domains. The first essay, penned by David C. Lindberg, focuses on the positive interaction between science and religion in the patristic and medieval period. It also discusses some key exceptions to this profitable cooperation between science and religion: Tertullian (195–215), Hypatia (355–415), and the condemnation of Aristotelian philosophy by the Catholic bishops issued in Paris in the 13th century. Yet, the author’s opinion is that these examples do not prompt advocacy of the “conflict myth” because such “struggles were exceptions rather than the rule” (p. 31). Notwithstanding, Augustine’s interpretation of science as a handmaiden to religion is taken to be the dominant attitude up until the late medieval period (p. 31). However, the analysis of the patristic period seems to be too minimal and it also suffers from not referring to some important works in the field.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, I think an important and controversial episode is omitted in Lindberg’s story, namely the well-known 14th century dispute over the role of the sciences in the economy of salvation between Gregory Palamas (monk at Mount Athos, later celebrated as a Saint by the Christian Orthodox Church) and Barlaam of Calabria, Latin theologian and philosopher.<sup>4</sup>

The essay by John Henry closely follows Harrison’s thesis that early modern empirical science was favored by religious views.<sup>5</sup> Like Lindberg, Henry also stresses that the conflict paradigm is due to a Whiggish portrayal of the history of science and religion (p. 39). Unfortunately, neither this essay nor the next one by Jonathan R. Topham (dealing with the history of natural theology) makes any reference to a central

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figure of the science and religion dialogue in the early modern period, the great Reformer Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560). Recent scholarship has shown Melanchthon's crucial contribution to the implementation and development of science in reformed Germany and abroad, a process upheld by Melanchthon's specific theological view on the sciences as depositories of God's providence.<sup>6</sup> Topham's work however makes a good case for the idea that natural theology appeared and functioned in agreement with the content of revealed theology and not detached from it (pp. 61–62).

John Hedley Broke's essay capitalizes on similar arguments in order to underpin the idea that the progress of science has not necessarily led to secularization. He concedes that, "it is surely more accurate to say that scientific theories have been susceptible of both theistic and atheistic readings" (p. 110).

This last statement is representative for the essays that form the second part of the book, where different facets of design and teleology in nature are discussed from the point of view of modern science. An interesting illustration of this occurs in the essay by Simon Conway Morris, where evolution towards intelligent life is explained in analogy with a search engine devised to search back in the history of organisms in order to find the prerequisites of life in more complex organizational structures.

Nancy Murphy's account of divine action in the context of contemporary philosophy contains some of the most positive conclusions given in the third part of the book. Murphy is confident in the success of a combination between Peacocke's pantheist theory, which holds both God's presence in the world and the world's presence in God, and the pantheist account of the quantum divine action approach (QDA). However, I am less enthusiastic in assenting to this idea given the fact that Peacocke's theory does not seem to be fully pantheistic and furthermore, the problems of QDA exceed those mentioned by Murphy.<sup>7</sup>

Though not the final article in the volume, Michael Ruse's essay, which deals with some traditional categories relevant to the relationship between science and religion, such as "independence," "conflict" and "interaction" is worth using for concluding this survey. Ruse declares that the two domains inevitably interact and clash, but that this does not interfere at all with the possibility of developing religious faith (p. 241).

All in all, this *Companion* fulfills its goal of providing us with a consistent introduction to some of the most significant themes that deal with science and religion. However, compared with similar achievements,<sup>8</sup> it has the drawback that it does not treat about the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions in the context of the science and religion dialogue.

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**References**

- <sup>1</sup> Draper, J. W., *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, 7th edition (London: Henry S. King, 1876).
- <sup>2</sup> White, A. D., *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York: Appleton, 1896).
- <sup>3</sup> See for example, Callahan, J. F., “Greek Philosophy and Cappadocian Cosmology”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12(1958): 29-57.
- <sup>4</sup> For more details, see Meyendorff, J., *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1964).
- <sup>5</sup> Harrison, P., *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- <sup>6</sup> For more details, see Kusakawa, S., *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy: The Case of Philip Melanchthon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- <sup>7</sup> Saunders, N., *Divine Action and Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- <sup>8</sup> *Science and Religion: New Historical Perspectives*, eds. T. Dixon, G. Cantor and S. Pumfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).