

Review Essay

Biology, Religion, and Philosophy: An Introduction, Michael L. Peterson and Dennis R. Venema, Cambridge University Press, 2021. ISBN 9781107667846

By Howard G. Andersen, PhD

Introduction

Cambridge University Press is to be commended for initiating a series of book publications promising to give introductions to philosophy and biology. Six other titles are included in the series, offering philosophical introductions to paleontology, agro-technology, human evolution, genetics, biological classification, and biology and feminism.

The series is edited by Michael Ruse, a fellow of both the Royal Society of Canada, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He is a British-born Canadian philosopher of science, specializing in the philosophy of biology. Ruse, currently in retirement, teaches at Florida State University. Ruse has been quite active in his field, seeking to reconcile science and religion. His approach is perhaps idiosyncratic and his written and oral presentations have been far from uncontroversial.¹

Peterson, a philosopher at Asbury Theological Seminary, and Venema, a professor of biology at Trinity Western University, have the expected academic credentials for their undertaking and each have published in the general area of science and religion. The book is properly described as a “comprehensive and accessible survey,” explaining “...the engagement between biology and religion on issues related to origins, evolution, design, suffering and evil, progress and purpose, love, humanity, morality, ecology and the nature of religion itself.” This reviewer largely agrees with the publisher’s note on the back cover which claims that the book is “...the perfect introduction for upper level undergraduates, graduate students, scholars, and interested general readers.” The book does not claim to resolve any particular issues or advance any of the controversial debates, only to provide an overview of the discussions between biology and religion to date. It does this articulately and comprehensively, is well documented with footnotes, offers a particularly helpful glossary especially of biological terms, an excellent “for further reading” list, and a useful index.

Noteworthy is the fact that in an earlier book, *Adam and the Genome*, Venema and co-author, Scot McKnight, each give a very brief insight into their personal backgrounds. It is gratifying to know that bringing considerations of a

philosophical nature into the conflictual arena of religion and science discussion has been found helpful.²

Project Design and Book Title

A book with a title which includes one of the scientific disciplines and religion is not unusual. What is unusual is the inclusion of philosophy in the title. This holds out the very welcome promise of shifting the mostly conflictual discussion of religion and science to something better. Philosophy is, after all, a broader consideration than either science or religion and raises the hopeful question of whether we now can get the discussion of science and religion rooted in epistemology where it belongs. Alas, the book falls short of this aspiration. Nonetheless the book does deliver on its own intentions, and so deserves a careful read by its intended audience.

A philosophical introduction to science or to each of the sciences has been a glaring lacuna in undergraduate science curricula at reputable universities for a very long time. In this reviewer's personal experience, four years of math and physics at one of Canada's leading public universities gave no philosophical orientation to science at all. It was assumed that science students would do science in the way prescribed by science and there was no need to give explicit contextualization to science in the bigger world of the academic disciplines, let alone in the larger context of a liberal democratic society. This lacuna was glaringly highlighted, and powerfully remedied, in one of the very first courses this reviewer took at a denominationally connected theological college in the same city.

A number of general criticisms of the book title and project design are in order. First, the title and the content which it implies deserves scrutiny. Biology and Philosophy are well established academic disciplines. But religion is not an academic discipline. Religious Studies would have brought the work of the book into better alignment since Religious Studies is an academic discipline. Religion is, by most understandings, a way of life, usually supported by articulated belief systems. It is not obvious that mixing two academic disciplines into discussion with a way of life has good potential for advancing our understandings.³

Second, even if it is granted that religion is a worthy member of the book's trio of considerations along with Biology and Philosophy, religion is a very broad category, and is itself a substantial mix of approaches. Biblical religion, as presented in the Bible and consisting of Judaism and Christianity, is largely a phenomenological religion, making constant references to the ongoing events of history and human experiences within it. Islam in distinction from Judaism and Christianity, is *both biblical and extra biblical*. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism, on the other hand are largely ontological, inward looking faiths featuring

inner enlightenment as the principal consideration. The nature of biblical religion is not sufficiently recognized in the deliberations of *Biology, Religion, and Philosophy*. Rather, appeal is constantly made to classical Christian theology, which is a very different thing.

Third, the interest of Philosophy is necessarily, and by design, broad enough to provide criticism of both Biology and Religion, and much more. Philosophy is not just one more contender in the discussion of Biology and Religion. It has the capacity, and the mandate, to examine the parameters on which all the academic disciplines and all the ways of life are established and practiced. Theology, by definition and by design, is an even broader category, subsuming even Philosophy. But Philosophy is not given that rightful place in the book. What we have in the title and in the content of the book is a very broad mix of assumptions, methods, and considerations. Although the book manages to conduct a philosophical discussion *around* the topics of Biology and Religion, it cannot be definitive on any subject it considers.

Encouraging Dialogue

The authors point out, helpfully, following Ian Barbour,⁴ that four approaches to the relation between science and religion can be pursued, namely: conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration. Conflict should be and usually is resolvable and therefore should not be an ongoing approach. While independence has its value, it is better to think that the field of all human knowledge and understanding is, at bottom, a unified one, and therefore worth pursuing. Integration has serious potential but would only be found with an epistemological understanding of each discipline and would otherwise be artificial and superficial. In any case, dialogue is the appropriate and time-honored way for human beings to conduct themselves and to make progress.

To make the dialogue between Christianity and science productive, each side will have to clarify what it is, and where it is coming from. Importantly, in reference to the biblical religions, and most especially to Christianity, the question of what represents Christianity in the book is critical. It makes frequent references to “classical (Christian) theology.” Classical Christian theology is generally that theology elaborated by the church in the period from the Gnosticism of the mid to late first century up to and including the contemporary late modern and postmodern era. The period from Constantine to Luther is especially relevant. This is a theology based almost entirely on Greek philosophical modes and categories of thought. It worked well for the Western church and for Western culture for more than fifteen hundred years. But it worked well largely because it was empowered by the state and by culture. The hegemony of the state and church left nothing to challenge “classical

Christian theology.” Luther and the Reformation did severely question that hegemony and western culture and science challenged classical Christian theology over the next two hundred years and more.

Two strong flashpoints were Galileo’s understanding of how the planets moved in relation to each other, and the Darwinian explanation of the origin of biological species. Galileo’s issue over the center of the universe has long been satisfactorily resolved. But discussions between science and Christianity have been conflictual for the last century and a half, largely over evolution. This is out of keeping with the fact that the early scientists like Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Leibniz, Kepler, and Pascal and more recent ones from the eighteenth century like Robert Boyle, Michael Faraday, James Maxwell, and Werner Heisenberg were, and many modern scientists are, in fact, Christians. Modern science arose in the Christian West and only in the Christian West for good reason. The three most powerful atheistic voices in the West over the last decade or so have made their anti-theistic arguments largely based on the perceived conflict of Christianity with science, especially over evolution.⁵ This reviewer expects that the conflict over evolution will gradually settle over the next decade or two while other cultural matters will strongly and rightly press in upon Christian thinking.

A great deal of the conflict between Christianity and science lies with the truncated way Christian theology has viewed and presented itself. Contemporary Christian theology, not yet having offered anything compellingly different from or in addition to classical theology, has work to do. While classical theology as a system of thought may function well in most of its undertakings, the Christian religion along with most other world religions consists not just of *what to think*, but also, and more especially with its ethic, of *what to do* and also, very much, with character, of *what to be*. On the latter two elements, Christian thinking has much catching up to do. Christianity has largely presented itself as one more system of thought. This presentation has comported well with the culture of the Western world which shaped it and was shaped by it. But Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and Jesus would not recognize it as authentic. In a postmodern era, it is not being found helpful, persuasive, or productive.

The epistemological ground of the Western world has shifted monumentally in the last 200 years. During the twentieth century, this shift has been evidenced in profound and dramatic ways in Christian and church practice. There is no need to change classical Christian theology as such. It has served its purpose. But if Christianity is to continue its proud and missional tradition of engaging with its surrounding culture, it must adapt its presentation of itself, while remaining true to its truth and its mission.

An Epistemological Approach

To get more definitive answers to the questions relating to Christianity and science, a thorough epistemological approach ought to be pursued as it alone has the potential of encouraging meaningful and productive dialogue. This approach would need to articulate at least the following fundamental considerations.

1. What are the starting assumptions?
2. What are the declared areas of interest/investigation?
3. What tools and methods are available and considered valid for each?
4. What are some areas of overlap worthy of serious and ongoing consideration?

Chapters 1-9

The authors helpfully and appropriately outline and define, in Chapter 1, some of the important issues to be addressed in the book.

On page 1, the authors say that “The subject of life – it’s origin, organization, and development – is a deeply vested interest for both biology and religion....” But biblical religion cannot adequately be characterized this way. Biblical religion is certainly interested in life in all its dimensions but not *especially* in its origin, organization and development. The origin, organization, and development of life itself, life as a “thing” as opposed to the life of an individual or the life of a society is the ambit of biology. Christianity is interested in how daily life is lived, especially in response to God (the first great commandment) and how it is lived in responsibility to others (the second great commandment).

Again, the authors’ definition of religion on page 9⁶ is masterful and appealing but does not properly represent biblical religion. Biblical religion means the way the *characters* of the biblical stories practiced their religion. Biblical religion is not organized around a concept. It is organized, if it is organized at all, around a quest, a phenomenological, empirical, existential, experiential *quest* for a relatable and personal God. The biblical narrative, along with its wisdom and prophetic literature, is the dynamic story of forgetting and remembering, lapsing and renewing, succeeding and failing, moving towards and moving away, and chaos and order, in relation to this quest. The fact that the literature of the Bible has been used as a *database* for defining any number of theological concepts, ideas, beliefs and religions, some considered orthodox, some considered heretical by later commentators, must not be allowed to misconstrue and obscure the true nature of biblical religion. It is not a surprise that Jews have understood this better than Christians, and continue the never-ending pragmatic, existential search for a deeper relationship to, and understanding of, God.

On page 10, the authors assert that “...a crucial area of inquiry into the relation of science and religion obviously pertains to the respective beliefs they hold,

their grounds and implications.” Earlier on the same page it is stated that “[i]n philosophy, we typically say that a belief is propositional, that it is expressible in terms of an assertion that can be true or false, probable or improbable.” Neither Abraham nor Jesus nor the apostles would have any problem with this. In Abraham’s great journey, acting on the great proposition that there was “a better country” out there somewhere (Heb 11:8ff), he went a certain direction until facts on the ground gave him pause to consider, then he adjusted, and moved on, all the while pursuing his hypothesis and adjusting to facts on the ground. The apostles had grave doubts about who Jesus was, both before and after the crucifixion, until presented with more convincing physical evidence, and then adjusted their propositions to suit the facts on the ground. In living a Christian life, this is the way it is, or should be. This process gives rise to *experientially verified beliefs*.

Sadly, classical Christian theology has not presented Christianity experientially verified beliefs but rather as a series of more or less inflexible propositional statements. Theism may well assert that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being, as the authors state, but the biblical documents, and therefore biblical religion, spend virtually no time arguing these specific points. It is classical Christian theology that does that. The point really is that some 1500 years of Christian theology has been articulated as propositional truth because that is what a powerfully Greek orientated culture needed and wanted. Christian theology did well for itself by responding to the surrounding culture in the way it did. As indicated above, classical Christian theology worked well as long as the culture supported and empowered Christian theology and the Christian church. This support, though sometimes oblique and indirect, was still much in evidence in, for example, the United Church of Canada, The Anglican Church of Canada, and especially the Roman Catholic church in Quebec until the 1960s or so. But that time is well over. Now in the Western world, the culture is moving decisively away from Christianity and the church.

A fresh, courageous and highly creative new look at biblical religion is urgently needed in the Western world. This is clearly an enormous task. The process is has already begun with such fresh approaches to the literature of the Old Testament as found in Brueggemann, Goldingay, and Waltke’s massive tomes. These authors make it clear that real biblical religion has to do, not essentially with a system of thought, but with essentially and emphatically discerning the activity of God in the lives of individuals and nations.⁷ Much more needs to be done. This is the necessary and urgent work of theologians and biblical scholars. Science and scientists bear no responsibility whatsoever for how Christianity chooses to present itself.

In the second section of Chapter 1, which is entitled “Science in Human Life,” the authors define science and make various claims for it. “Science is one of the most impressive knowledge-gathering projects in human history, providing an

astounding amount of information about the world and promising much more.” And further, “Science is an important expression of the human drive to understand the physical universe – how it is structured and how it works – and it remains the most productive method to that end that humans have thus far conceived.” With all that, Christians can readily and enthusiastically agree. But, in relation to the discussion between science and religion, that is irrelevant.

To begin with, religion is not principally a “knowledge-gathering project” like science is. Religion seeks principally to answer the how question, not the what question. Religion principally seeks wisdom, not bare knowledge and facts. Greek philosophy inserted the question of “what is true” into Western culture. But biblical religion is almost entirely about “what to do,” that is to say, how shall humans act in and react to the world they live in? Of course, facts and knowledge of the physical universe are useful for this quest and also raise a whole range of ethical issues to which biblical religion must respond. Science seeks *facts and knowledge*. Religion seeks *meaning*. Nuclear power is a discovery and invention of science. It has enormous power to create and to destroy. Science, *qua science*, cannot provide guidance on *what this means* for humans or for what *to do* with nuclear power. That has to come from elsewhere.

In addition, the fact that science limits itself, very appropriately, to understanding the physical universe puts its aim and ambition out of essential conflict with religion. Religion’s main interest is not principally or even largely understanding how the physical universe works. Religion’s view of the physical universe is more about what it means for human life. Its approach to the physical universe is largely phenomenological. See for example the marvelous descriptions of nature and the physical universe in Job 38-41. This speech is the longest in the mouth of God in the entire Bible.

The authors also highlight science’s claim to objectivity in its approach to the physical universe, and this is laudable and necessary to the scientific enterprise, although difficult for any human to achieve in full measure. Religion makes no such claim. Indeed, religion is emphatically about the *acting subject*, not the *receiving object*.

The authors also stress the point that science must assume that there are causes for the phenomena they observe. This seems an unnecessary claim because religion also looks for causes. Science rightfully pursues the physical causes of physical phenomena while religion’s remit embraces all of that, and also includes and concentrates on personal, subjective, social, and metaphysical causation.

Chapter 10

The last chapter of the book, titled “Humanity, Religion and the Environment,” is in some ways the best and is least troubled by the epistemological

concerns outlined above. Neither biology nor science occur in the title of the chapter, and biology/science are not given the privileged position of other chapters. This final chapter has all the markings of a solid humanities style discussion of issues that are truly comparable. None of the elements is itself an academic discipline. And there is the important recognition that the Western attitude to nature originates more from Greek thinking than from the Hebrew thinking of the Old Testament. (235)

Conclusion and Recommendation

This reviewer recommends *Biology, Religion, and Philosophy* for its intended purpose, namely to serve as an introduction to the overall subject matter for upper-level undergraduates, graduate students, scholars, and interested general readers.

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Notes

¹ “Michael Ruse,” Wikipedia, Accessed 8 July 2022.

² Dennis R. Venema and Scot McKnight, *Adam and the Genome* (Brazos Press, 2017).

³ It could be argued that Theology, also an academic discipline with, by definition, unlimited scope, should have replaced Philosophy but this would be an entirely different project from what the book actually is.

⁴ I.G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperOne, 1997), 77-105.

⁵ Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens (now deceased), and Daniel Dennett, the self-styled “four horsemen of the apocalypse.”

⁶ “A human phenomenon that is constituted by a set of beliefs, actions, and experiences, both personal and collective, organized around the concept of an ultimate reality that inspires or requires a certain response like devotion, worship, or focused life orientation.”

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel. Volume One* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003). Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2007).