Review of Alister E. McGrath, A Scientific Theology, Volume 2: Reality

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A Scientific Theology, Volume 2: Reality

By Alister E. McGrath

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Abstract

Alister McGrath is developing a trilogy entitled *A Scientific Theology*. In this context he is engaged in dialogue with the natural sciences, and especially with epistemological and methodological issues as they arise in relation to the sciences and theology. His main theological inspiration seems to come from Karl Barth and, especially, T.F. Torrance. Volume 2, reviewed here, deals especially with 'realism' in the sciences and in theology.

1 Overall character

This is a review of the second volume in a trilogy on 'scientific theology' by Alister McGrath, one of the most prolific evangelical academic theologians of the moment. In the first volume (reviewed by me in *Ars Disputandi* 2 (2002),[1]) he presented the prolegomena to this project as Part One and discussed the secular concept of nature (as Part Two) in relation to the Christian doctrine of creation. This second volume deals with 'Reality', whereas the third volume, announced to appear in October 2003 will be on 'Theory'. In this set of books McGrath seeks to extend an approach advocated by Torrance, including Torrance's realist appropriation of the more Kantian theological ideas of Karl Barth. McGrath's 'scientific theology' is not a theology shaped by the sciences, but rather a theology that aspires to be scientific by rigorously adhering to a theological method considered scientific. 'A scientific theology thus conceives itself as an *a posteriori* discipline, responding to and offering an account of what may be known of God through revelation, taking full account of the stratified nature of that knowledge of God' (xi). He is neither interested in a generic theism, nor in a 'natural theology' without acknowledging God's self-revelation.

2 Summary

This book, containing 'Part Three: Reality', has its chapters numbered 7 through 11, thus emphasizing its setting within the whole trilogy. The 'Preface' recapitulates volume 1 and sets the agenda for this volume. McGrath speaks of 'the collapse of the Enlightenment project' with its foundationalism and universal rationality. Though he appreciates this 'collapse' positively, he is concerned that

1. Willem B. Drees, 'Review of A Scientific Theology, Volume 1: Nature,' *Ars Disputandi* 2 (2002), [http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000058/index.html].

postmodernism with its emphasis on the social construction of our concepts and tradition-bound rationality gives away too easily the realist intent. Our constructs 'are to be regarded as interpretative and predictive tools for the better understanding of the reality under investigation' (xiv). McGrath finds for the articulation of such a 'critical realism' Roy Bhaskar's writings most helpful.

Chapter 7 deals with 'Rationality and knowledge in theology and the natural sciences'. The thesis of this chapter is, briefly, that knowledge can be held to be knowledge about the world, even though traditions and communities shape the human response to the world. In the course of this chapter, he comments critically on Rorty's opposition of solidarity (a community-based view of knowledge) and objectivity and Rorty's preference for 'solidarity'. He also writes critically about George Lindbeck and other 'postliberals', as their programme has turned out to be theologically barren, in part because of the 'cultural-linguistic' approach to theology adopted. The positive argument of this chapter concentrates upon the stratified character of reality, reflected in the different methodologies needed for different sciences—divided here as molecular sciences (physics, chemistry), biological sciences, social sciences, psychological and semiological sciences. Furthermore, experimentation is emphasized as the critical factor in the credibility of theories in the natural sciences, in combination with theoretical coherence, as 'extra-systemic reference and intra-systemic consistency' (19). The rejection of 'classical foundationalism', appealing to basic knowledge as the starting point of all justification of beliefs, does not count against the idea that knowledge is to be justified in and through its relations with reality. We cannot but have a particular tradition, a particular view of reality. Rationality is not found in independence from any tradition, but in the willingness to modify beliefs when needed.

In Chapter 8 McGrath considers natural theology in Christian perspective. He envisages natural theology as a trans-traditional device for interpreting the natural world. Such a natural theology is rooted in the Christian tradition, both in the concept of creation and in the confidence that God does not leave us without witness of his being. Such a natural theology is presented as the appropriate middle ground between the Enlightenment 'myth of universal reason', criticized with the help of McIntyre, and postmodern particularism, criticized here in its articulation by John Milbank. Elements of the trans-traditional but Christian natural theology envisaged by McGrath are mathematics, the concept of a logos incarnated in Christ, the religious quest in general, wonder, natural law and the quest for goodness.

Chapter 9 considers 'The foundations of realism in the natural sciences', presenting realism as the working philosophy of most natural scientists, preferable over instrumentalism and idealism as well as over postmodern misinterpretations of the natural sciences. Chapter 10 broadens the horizon to consider other disciplines which study our stratified reality', thus coming to speak of critical realism in the social sciences and in theology. After presenting Roy Bhaskar's articulation of critical realism McGrath applies this to theology, and especially to theological ideas of Karl Barth and T.F. Torrance. He ends by speaking of the stratified nature of reality by distinguishing between the interests in nature, history (e.g. by Au-

gustine and Pannenberg) and experience (e.g. for Schleiermacher and Jonathan Edwards).

Chapter 11, the final chapter of this volume, presents 'the contours of a scientific theology', presenting a Christocentric theology substantially and methodologically inspired by Karl Barth and T.F. Torrance. Theology is seen as a response to reality, and hence as *a posteriori*, responding to a reality that has primacy over us and our experience, and as realist in theological intent, against Don Cupitt and others. Scientific theology aspires to be an explanation of reality.

The book ends with an epilogue of one page, linking the discussion of this volume on realism, the knower and the known to the next one, where the focus will be on 'Theory', that is, on the way in which 'scientific theories and Christian doctrines are developed in response to reality'.

3 Concerns

McGrath distinguishes in chapter 10 the critical realism he espouses from the way this term has been used by others in 'religion and science'. McGrath's main complaint seems to be that authors such as Ian Barbour, J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, Arthur Peacocke, and John Polkinghorne have failed to take into account 'the debate within the philosophical community at large over the merits of the form of critical realism espoused by Roy Bhaskar and his colleagues since the late 1970s' (207). McGrath dismisses the writings on realism of the authors mentioned above as 'an unfashionable intellectual backwater', while locating Bhaskar 'within the academic mainstream' (208). To learn more about Bhaskar and how extensively Bhaskar's work is part of the academic mainstream, I picked up the Blackwell *Companion to Epistemology* (1992), Routledge History of Philosophy, Volume X, *Philosophy of Meaning, Knowledge and Value in the 20th Century* (1997), and the Second Edition of the *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (1999). None of these had Bhaskar in the index, nor was there any reference to him in the passages on appropriate subjects such as realism and critical realism. (Nor was there to Barbour and the others mentioned, but these 'religion and science' authors are not understanding themselves as articulating a special form of realism, but rather presenting their own epistemic views by selecting from the literature on philosophy of science and epistemology.) It seems as if McGrath overrates the actual impact and standing of Bhaskar's work, elevating a particular subset of the philosophical discourse to the mainstream. Which, of course, does not bear upon the quality of these ideas, but it does make his criticism of others for missing Bhaskar's work a bit overdone. The 'Copernican Revolution' McGrath ascribes to Bhaskar (209), has not only been missed by most authors in the 'religion-and-science' discussion, but by the professional philosophical community at large. As he presents Bhaskar's views, differences with other articulations of realism which recognizes the philosophy of sciences and the social nature of the scientific enterprise turn out to be far less prominent than McGrath's announcements in the book had made me expect.

Like the previous volume, this book is rich in footnotes and references. Sometimes, it is puzzling what the references are supposed to add. For instance,

McGrath writes on page 281: 'To illustrate this point, we may consider the case of physics, widely regarded as "the ideal of scientific knowledge".' Does this claim about how physics is regarded need a reference? Anyhow, the note refers to a book by John Ziman, *Reliable Knowledge*. Is Ziman a sociologist who has studied the population and concluded that physics is widely regarded as the ideal of knowledge? Or is he an example of the position indicated? Neither turns out to be the case; Ziman criticizes the elevation of physics to such a status, as we learn from McGrath one page later. McGrath gives many references, but they were not always useful to me, nor do they always seem to offer the scholarly support suggested by their presence.

On the whole I appreciate McGrath's strong defence of taking the sciences seriously, against postmodernisms, and his interest in taking theology's intent in relating to reality seriously. However, I was not convinced by the move McGrath makes from an argument in favour of scientific realism to the defence of a form of theological realism. There is an enormous gulf between the sciences and theologies as regards their success, whether measured by instrumental and experimental efficacy or by intellectual coherence, which is not seriously addressed here. Furthermore, for a relative outsider, arguments about a reality behind the phenomena studied by the natural sciences may well convince him about the untenability of non-realism in the ontological sense (whatever the fate of realism in the epistemological, referential kind), whereas an ontological commitment is much harder to sustain for theological claims. Avoiding engagement with these issues by working within a theological tradition with a strong concept of revelation makes the argument much easier, but also far more insular. Last but not least, Christian theology has not only an explanatory and realist intent, as to some extent reflected in the concept of creation, but also a transformative and critical intent, which seems to make theological realism theologically problematic.