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A Scientific Theology, Volume 3: Theory

By Alister E. McGrath

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Abstract

In the third and final volume of his *A Scientific Theology*, the evangelical theologian Alister McGrath discusses the theoretical dimensions of theology. Theory is defended as a legitimate interest in theology, with a descriptive and explanatory agenda which cannot do but combine empirical and (a posteriori) metaphysical aspects.

1 Overall character

[1] With this volume on the theoretical dimension of Christian theology McGrath concludes his trilogy *A Scientific Theology*. The two preceding volumes dealt with 'Nature' and with 'Reality', that is, with issues such as the constructed character of 'nature', creation, and critical realism.[1] The four chapters of this volume deal with the role of theory in theology, namely (12) the *legitimacy* of understanding theology as having a theoretical dimension, (13) the function of theory as offering a *representation* of reality, (14) the role of *explanation* in theology, and (15) the place of *metaphysics* in theology. Theory is understood in this volume as a 'communal beholding of reality'.

[2] As McGrath writes in his 'Conclusions: Anticipating a Scientific Dogmatics', the whole project has been more on methodological issues than on substantive ones. A substantive dogmatics, however, is too come. 'So patient reader, I must leave you for a while. I trust, however, that we shall meet again soon.' In the Preface to this volume he announces books on the concept of heresy and one on the development of doctrine within the next five years. Thus, McGrath may be expected to continue to be a most prolific writer in theology for the years to come. Aside of the new books announced the current trilogy has been reworked already into a single, more introductory book, titled *The Science of God: An Introduction to a Scientific Theology* (Contiuum, 2004; 256 pp, GBP 9,99)).

1. For my reviews of the other volumes, see: Willem B. Drees, 'Review of *A Scientific Theology, Volume 1: Nature*' *Ars Disputandi* 2 (2002), `http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000058/index.html` and, 'Review of *A Scientific Theology, Volume 2: Reality*' *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), `http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000099/index.html`.

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2 Summary

[3] One of the challenges to the *legitimacy* of theory has to do with the nature of faith. As McGrath writes, 'If theology is concerned with evoking the praise and adoration of God' (29), would not the concentration on doctrinal subtleties be distracting? Another concern is the reductionism that is inherent in any theory, as a theory seeks to capture in universal abstractions the diversity of concrete particulars. Thus, romantics downplayed the role of theory in the sciences, and thereby lacked sufficiently nerve and intellectual responsibility, and failed. 'Identifying what lies beneath the observed structures and patterns of the world does not negate what is observed.' (35) I concur; reduction is not necessarily denial or elimination. It is argued that theory serves useful and legitimate functions in theology as well, positively in unpacking the complex biblical witness and negatively by safeguarding the church against false understandings of its central witness (24). Theory is part of a true engagement with reality.

[4] In the chapter on *representation*, the relationship between words and reality, McGrath considers not only theology and the natural sciences, but also changing conceptions of the arts, where some have deemed the representational aspect to be irrelevant, as art is art for the aesthetic response it evokes. McGrath defends a significant representational intent to scientific and theological language, as aspiring to represent a stratified reality. Thus he discusses the introduction of new terms such as electron and *homoousion*, and the use of sentences and images. McGrath considers the use of analogies and models to describe reality in a scientific theology. McGrath argues that the justification does not lie in the effectiveness of models and analogies within the natural sciences, and rightly so, as such a legitimisation of analogy in theology already presumes an analogy between science and theology. His conviction that analogies are appropriate because 'a Christian doctrine of creation entails an analogical mode of argumentation' (108), leads to a substantial reflection on Karl Barth's criticisms of analogical reasoning as investing the created order with too much revelatory significance.

[5] The human intellectual quest extends beyond description to explanation. Theology aspires to offer a unified *explanation* of reality. In this context, McGrath discusses extensively the concept of revelation. He considers the question 'What *was* revelation?' (151) to be more important than 'What is revelation? Further issues include a discussion of the Duhem-Quine thesis (or theses), and the way we live with anomalies as features not explainable or at least not yet explained in the context of our current understanding. McGrath treats evil as the prime example of an anomaly for theology. Christian theology allows suffering 'to be seen as noetic rather than ontic, resulting from limitations on our perception of the situation, rather than from the situation itself.' (209) I wonder how this works when we consider examples of evil as moral failure, where we seem to have an ontic rather than a noetic problem, with the tension between evil and freedom. The concluding part of this chapter deals with the development of doctrine, for which McGrath refers to Neurath's image of the reconstruction of a boat while at sea. Thus, the question arises how orthodoxy and heresy are distinguished, if not

with hindsight given the institutional authority of the church. McGrath holds that 'there are clear parallels between the development of doctrine and the emergence of new paradigms within the scientific community' (233), including, as McGrath has it, where after a period of divergence there is convergence in the reception of ideas and consolidation, such as took place in the formulations chosen by the ecumenical councils.

[6] The final chapter of the book, and of the trilogy, deals with 'the place of metaphysics in theology'. McGrath discusses the verificationist challenge against all metaphysics, problems in defining metaphysics, Heidegger's metaphysical approach and Derrida's criticisms, the metaphysics implicit in postmodern anti-metaphysical rhetoric, metaphysical issues arising in quantum physics and in sociobiology, and more. As characteristic of the work as a whole, this chapter is also more on the possibility of metaphysics than on any substantial issues in metaphysics. McGrath holds that liberal theologians such as Gordon Kaufman, and much earlier Ritschl and Harnack, have been too much influenced by the critiques of metaphysics. His affinity is clearly with the classical dogmatic development which originated in the Hellenistic period of Christianity. Luther's theology of the cross is for McGrath an excellent example of an *a posteriori* metaphysical response to the biblical narratives, and Eberhard Jüngel's theological programme a further improvement.

3 Commentary

[7] This is a complex book, with extensive considerations on historical and philosophical issues in theology and in the sciences, and enormous amounts of references. In comparison to the first volume of this trilogy, McGrath writes less antagonistically regarding others in 'religion and science', such as Arthur Peacocke, even though he is no less outspoken where he perceives genuine disagreements.

[8] Remarkable was for me his preference of the question 'What *was* revelation' over 'What *is* revelation?', though it fits his interest in revelation as given. McGrath argues that this shift is similar to a shift in the natural sciences. 'While cosmologists are concerned to trace the universe back to its first few seconds, and evolutionary biologists to trace the complex ancestry of humanity, a scientific theology sets itself the agenda of determining what brought the Christian tradition into being, and how this can and should continue to sculpture its intellectual contours.' (151). However, for the sciences the study of the past is highly dependent upon a uniformitarian assumption. Thus, geology took off in the nineteenth century when the same processes of erosion, sedimentation and tectonics which we observe today were taken to be those that formed over long periods of time mountain ranges. The interest in human ancestry is part of the desire to understand evolutionary developments, including the evolution of cultures. The interest of evolutionary biologists is not merely in the abduction to past events, but in the presentation of a coherent understanding without any factors not currently operative. The Big Bang theory is not really a theory about the Big Bang, but rather about the evolution of the universe until the present, with the physics that we have

tested in other circumstances as well. Even extremely speculative physics (e.g., black holes or superstrings) which we cannot test in the lab, are still dealt with as if these same laws apply in the lab and in the universe, now and in the past.

[9] Theory is 'conceived in terms of the *communal beholding of reality*', a strategy McGrath considers as building upon the insights of Heidegger and Habermas (xiii). A characteristic concern is with the maintenance of identity. 'The maintenance of this identity has been the subject of no small importance, especially at times when the Christian community has felt itself to be under threat of assimilation into a broader cultural movement – the fate which befell the Jewish community at the Egyptian city of Elephantine, whose origins are to be traced back to the fifth century BC, which suffered a radical erosion of its distinctiveness, apparently with assent or equanimity, and eventually ceased to exist as a separate entity.' (25) 'Closure' is accepted by McGrath as an activity that is appropriate 'within a communal context' (50). This is supported by a brief reference to MacIntyre's theories regarding the 'tradition-bound understandings of rationality' (51). I find this emphasis on the community to be problematic, as the boundaries of a community may be shifting. Disagreements within a community cannot be resolved by appeal to the community, until after the decision have been made and some have been expelled as heretics, no longer belonging to the community. Furthermore, even if my neighbours don't belong to my community of faith, they belong to the human community, and thus their alternative theories and views are in principle challenges to me. I can't be satisfied with the observation that my understanding rationality is bound up with my tradition I have to become convinced that I am more rational than they are. In this emphasis on community, McGrath sees some analogies with the natural sciences. However, even though there is an enormous amount of fragmentation due to division of labour, the normative community of the sciences is in the end unlimited, in a way that does not seem to fit this understanding of theology. 'We have stressed that, following the failure of the Enlightenment project, it is essential to recognize that rationality is not a 'universal' notion, but something that is mediated and constituted by a tradition.' (138) I wonder whether 'the failure of the Enlightenment project' is as obvious as it is to McGrath. The empirical fact that we are always falling short of the ideals of a shared and unbiased rationality does not justify the normative role ascribed here to the community of faith.

[10] With this third volume McGrath has completed an impressive trilogy on many fundamental methodological issues regarding theology in conversation with contemporary positions in philosophy, especially though not exclusively, the philosophy of science. For a second edition I would suggest to expand the index as to cover also the footnotes, as this would make the book a more useful resource for explorations in an interesting, complex and important territory.