

Peter Harrison and Jon H. Roberts (eds.), *Science Without God: Rethinking the History of Scientific Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 288 pages, £65.00, 9780198834588.

A perpetual issue in debates about science and religion concerns naturalism, a term that most often means a commitment to reject supernatural explanations for natural phenomenon, preferring instead explanations in terms of natural causes, forces, and laws. For advocates of the “conflict model” of science and religion, naturalism lies at the heart of the struggle because modern science does not permit appeals to God, with persons divided about whether this stipulation is a strength or fatal weakness for scientific inquiry.

As one often expects when studying an issue in detail, however, the issues and problems associated with naturalism are much more complicated than it first appears. Naturalism as a concept has a long history, well beyond the past 150 years where the position has become associated with scientific atheism, and it did not emerge in its current form (in opposition to the supernatural) in the Scientific Revolution. The great value of this book is the way the editors, Peter Harrison and Jon Roberts, have assembled top historians on different time periods in the history of science to reveal the complexity. Starting with the philosophers of ancient Greece, this book describes the different ways that ideas about nature, the supernatural, and natural inquiry have shifted over time through the medieval period to the Scientific Revolution and beyond.

I cannot hope to summarize this rich volume, but some highlights for me are: how the rise of naturalistic thinking in Ancient Greek philosophy continued to be anchored to concepts of the divine; how a form of methodological naturalism (i.e., natural explanations must appeal to natural causes) emerged in the Christian universities of medieval Europe; the “laws of nature” as a concept emerging from the philosophy of Descartes; the naturalization of Biblical interpretation as a more controversial issue than Darwinism in the late nineteenth century; the move of geologists (who were mostly Christian) away from a “sacred history” account based upon Biblical passages to a more naturalistic account of the formation of the earth; the ways that many Christian scientists in the Scientific Revolution understood naturalism to be supporting theism rather than a substitute for it; the at least thirty writers who developed a form of Christian materialism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because of what they saw as a more Biblical Hebraic anthropology; and the way anti-clerical Victorian scientists began to use scientific naturalism as a wedge issue to professionalize science and remove scientific institutions and universities out from under the influence and power of the church.

The biggest takeaway of this book for me is that some form of naturalism was practiced by Christians studying nature long before scientific atheism appeared. There would seem to be plenty of room for Christian theologians to articulate a middle ground on the continuum between Intelligent Design proponents, who want to reformulate science to allow supernatural explanations, and the implausible reductive naturalisms that are often espoused by scientists today. A robust theological naturalism, at least in some form, would seem to follow from Christian affirmations of the goodness of creation and the transcendence of God, who is not just another object in the universe.

More than anything, the historical research found in *Science Without God* offers the possibility to question our present philosophical assumptions and to provide new possibilities for theological reflection by uncovering forgotten arguments from long ago. I hope that more theologians and philosophers will accept the invitation.

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