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SCIENCE AND WISDOM

A review of Jürgen Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, translated by Margaret Kohl, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. 224 pp. \$20.00 (paper).

THIS TEXT IS A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS that date from as early as 1963 to as recently as 2001, with a couple of pieces hitherto unpublished (and undated). The reader will find the expected variations in quality among the chapters, as well as unavoidable repetition that comes in collections such as this. Nevertheless, there is much to ponder here.

A great deal of work has been done over the last number of years promoting the constructive engagement of science and religion. That work takes a variety of forms, from rigorous scientific research into phenomena largely ignored outside of the traditional realm of religion, (e.g., studies of altruism, prayer and healing, brain states during religious meditation, etc.), to trans-disciplinary explorations of issues that arise at the intersection of religion and science, (creation accounts, evolution of matter and spirit, anthropic elements of cosmology, far-future universe, etc.), to religious/ethical evaluations of advancing technology and its human and environmental impact, (bioengineering, cloning, nanotechnology, psychopharmacology, environmental crises, etc.), to wide-ranging attempts at developing what might be called “integral wisdom,” (speculative philosophical systems, re-vamped metaphysics, “scientific theologies,” etc.) while trying to do justice to both scientific discovery and religious insight or sentiment).

Moltmann’s essays in this volume tend to be more of a loose set of meditations on our current postmodern, post-Enlightenment, probabilistic universe in the light of traditional religious—predominantly, but by no means exclusively, Christian—worldviews. There is not very much science in this book, but there is a little bit of wisdom, if by “wisdom” one means deep insight and/or or prudential advice. More importantly, there is a rich vein of prophetic witness, let’s say; a deeply-felt, indeed, spiritual drive that guides these reflections toward

a future to hope in. For Moltmann, there is wisdom embedded in the cosmos, in God's creation, and moral imperatives issue from the recognition of this wisdom. Moltmann calls for a new "natural theology" (69) that takes heed of the findings of natural science and that attends to the profound "pastoral" needs of the present day.

These essays emphasize the core of Moltmann's "theology of hope," that the key theological modality is futural, that what God will do is even more important than what God has done. If theology is to be messianic or eschatological in its essence, then the view of both God and the cosmos is "open," which means, to quote Heidegger that "higher than actuality stands possibility." (66)

Given this, that God is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8) cannot mean for Moltmann's theology that God is somehow "static" or that God "has no future." This insight immediately raises the question of time, and Moltmann deals with it over the course of several chapters. Moltmann argues for an "eschatological understanding of creation," as opposed to a "protological understanding of eschatology." (34) We need to think the past from the future, rather than the future from the past. For Moltmann, the openness of the cosmos carries implications for time. Instead of the cyclical time of a closed universe, time is unidirectional and irreversible, giving each moment a uniqueness and un-repeatability. Despite time's form as *exitus* and *reditus* (188) and a correspondence between end and beginning, in Moltmann's view the return to beginning is related to but not identical with the eternal return of the Same. (189) The future becomes the key hermeneutical touchstone for understanding God and transcendence.

God's Being is in his coming, not in his becoming (and passing away). If God and future are bound together in this way, then God's Being must be thought of eschatologically and the 'future' must be thought of theologically. The future becomes the source and the meaning of time. It does not put an end to time, like eternity, and it is not absorbed into time as transience. It rather opens up the time of history and qualifies this historical time to be the End-time. Because it is a matter of God's future, the times reach out for God's eternity, and this outreach of the times is their future, a reaction to God's coming, and a parable of his eternity. Time is no longer the irresistible tow of transience and the triumph of death. And the future becomes a new paradigm of transcendence. (101)

To think creation and thus the present eschatologically, we have to adopt a non-pagan, more eastern approach to speaking of God. In addition to being informed by Heidegger's philosophy, Moltmann's ideas have roots in Isaac Luria and the Kabbalah (e.g., 62, 119, 184), the panentheistic Russian mystical theologians

(Bulgakov, Solovyov, Florensky [151-153]), and the Tao te Ching (Chapter XII), seeing the omnipotence of God in God's patience (186), in God's self-withdrawal, and God's creating space for creation.

The biblical story of creation teaches us to understand God's free creative work (Hebrew *barah*) as a creation which has no presuppositions; it is a creation *ex nihilo*, as later terminology put it—a creation out of nothing. But where is this Nothing supposed to be, if the One God is omnipresent? For his presence then has no limits. So in fact there can be no extra Deum, nothing outside God. We find the only convincing explanation in the Kabbalah tradition, with its concept of *zimzum*: God restricts his omnipresence, withdraws himself, and by doing so concedes a space of absolute nothingness—that is to say, a space of God's non-being—into which he calls his creation 'out of non-being into being.' (Rom 4.17) To put it in Taoistic terms, the Being of God the Creator and the existence of his creation then proceed out of the non-being God has conceded. Even without knowing the Kabbalah, John Scotus Erigena did not find ideas of this kind alien since, in neo-Platonic fashion, he saw the 'nothing' out of which God creates his creation as God himself: creation *ex nihilo* is creation *e Deo*—creation out of nothing is creation out of God, because God is both being and nothingness. (184)

Shekinah and kenosis, self-shining and self-emptying, revealing and hiding, presence and absence, glory and humiliation are all inextricably bound together, such that, in Moltmann's words, "We might put it epigrammatically and say that God never appears mightier than in the act of his self-limitation, and never greater than in the act of his self-humiliation." (64) God disappears in the appearing of the cosmos, its explosion into being.

Our science can reflect this theological insight. For instance, one could interpret the Big Bang along the (Trinitarian) relations of withdrawal and creating space for the other. (62) This "interpretation," though, is not itself "scientific" but is rather an insight of wisdom. For Moltmann, wisdom comes—if it comes—through recapturing a childlike astonishment, through retrieving ourselves from being lost in the "they-self" (144) For Moltmann, wisdom "is an ethics of knowledge" (147) which carries the imperative that we become wise:

If, as we are assuming here, research into nature is the investigation of the natural memories inherent in the systems of matter and life, then we are investigating the wisdom embedded in the natural systems, and we do so in order to become wise ourselves. Then scientific reason is no longer merely a matter of the functional and dominating intellect. It is also a receptive organ. And if this is so, it should be possible to absorb instrumentalized reason once more into what the Greeks called *phronesis*—the all-embracing wisdom about

life. (147)

This wisdom about life, which finds glory in kenotic self-withdrawing, in creating space to allow the other to come, issues in prophetic injunctions. For instance:

The ethos of the struggle for existence must be changed into the ethos of peace in existence.

The principle of self-preservation from others can be transformed into the principle of self-fulfillment with others, that is to say, the principle of solidarity.

The systems of fear and aggression which were necessary for self-preservation can be phased out in favour of systems of hope and co-operation. (139)

This ethical impulse, drawn from a renewed sense of natural theology and informed by the kenotic essence of the Christ-event (Philippians 2:5-11), is shared by others in the burgeoning science-and-religion field. Nancey Murphy and George F.R. Ellis, in their *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) put a similar thesis succinctly:

The (apparent) fine-tuning of the cosmological constants to produce a life-bearing universe (the anthropic issue) seems to call for explanation. A theistic explanation allows for a more coherent account of reality—as we know it from the perspective of both the natural and the human sciences, and from other spheres of experience such as the moral sphere—than does a non-theistic account. However, not all accounts of the divine nature are consistent with the patterns of divine action we seem to perceive in the natural world. God appears to work in concert with nature, never overriding or violating the very processes that God has created. This account of the character of divine action as refusal to do violence to creation, whatever the cost to God, has direct implications for human morality; it implies a “kenotic” or self-renunciatory ethic, according to which one must renounce self-interest for the sake of the other, no matter what the cost to oneself. (xv)

What can we make of a natural theological ethics such as this? The question seems to come down to: Does the cosmos, as God’s creation (?), teach us ethical imperatives? The newness of this “new” natural theological reading (advanced by numerous others besides Murphy, Ellis, and Moltmann) comes from findings in the natural sciences (e.g., the anthropic character of the cosmological constants), rather than from some never-before felt theological impulse. The general effort is an old one: to read from the “book of Nature” that which is read in “the book of God’s Revelation.”

We “philosophical sophisticates” cannot help but find these efforts philosophically naïve. We are all too “Hume-anly” aware of the perils of trying to derive “ought” from “is.”

So what is the status of attempts like these? I would argue (well, not really “argue” but assert) that the value is in their prophetic witness and their pastoral concern. Prophets do not speak in philosophical arguments. They speak, and the “truth” is made manifest for those with ears to hear. Pastors speak a word of comfort, and “true” healing can begin. Rather than ignore these works or “consign them to the flames,” we philosophical sophisticates should recognize how our judgment of such things has become impaired by our sophistication. We philosophical sophisticates will want to put the words “true” and “truth” in “scare-quotes” to remind us that this all depends on what one means by “truth.” And we know that no matter what one means, that meaning can ultimately be deconstructed (or more accurately, is deconstructible), and we then downgrade or denigrate (if we are so inclined—although, what inclines us?) that meaning—along with prophets and pastors (if there really are any).

Still, the question of truth raises issues of justification and judgment. Can we get to truth philosophically, via logic and argument? Can we get at it scientifically, via observation and experiment? Can we get at it religiously, via scripture and tradition? Can we get at it poetically, via imagination and creation? Can we get at it “negatively,” via de-mythologizing or deconstruction?

If one is willing to accept a little philosophical naïveté, one might just answer “all of the above.” And if one does, one might twist free of the obsessively analytical emphasis in the main currents of contemporary philosophy (both “Anglo-American” and “Continental” flavors). And in this case, one will find reward in allowing Moltmann’s compelling vision to steep in one’s own view of life and the cosmos, thus enriching one’s own insight and judgment.

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