

Research Space

Journal article

Review of 'The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities', by Alister McGrath and 'Against Methodology in Science and Religion: Recent Debates on Rationality and Theology' by Joshua Reeves Lawson, F.

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Alister E. McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. x, 288. Hb. £25. ISBN 978-0-19-881310-1.

Joshua A. Reeves, *Against Methodology in Science and Religion: Recent Debates on Rationality and Theology*.

Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019. Pp. xii, 141. Hb. £115. ISBN 978-1-138-47794-0.

While these two volumes by Alister McGrath and Josh Reeves approach science and religion from differing perspectives (Reeves spends a chapter of his book critiquing McGrath's use of critical realism), both introduce the field of science and religion with reference to logical positivism and the subsequent drive to distinguish between science and non-science, in which non-scientific disciplines then aim to show 'how they meet the standards of scientific knowledge [...] in order to gain respect and support' (Reeves, 1). This aim is particularly true of theology, claims Reeves, 'for to admit otherwise would be to acknowledge that theology lacks intellectual content and does not deserve a place in modern intellectual life' (1).

Thereafter, the authors take different approaches to challenging the assumed positivist narrative. McGrath seeks to establish 'rationality as both theory and practice [...] and to avoid simplistic reductions to allegedly "essential" or "universal" characterizations of either "science" or "religion"' (McGrath, 14-15), whereas Reeves challenges particular features of 'scientific truth' in framing interaction between science and religion, focusing on realism, rationality and method as perceived essential features of a unified 'scientific approach'.

For a text that emphasises the importance of recognising assumptions, Reeves's *Against Methodology* assumes that 'one of the key aims of science and religion scholars has been to show how religious or theological enquiry might be rational, thus showing why the subject deserves a place in university curriculums' (Reeves, 8). It could be argued, however, that contemporary debate between science and religion is not so much absorbed in establishing the academic legitimacy of theology as driven instead by a desire to expound the implications of scientific understanding for theology. Reeves argues that much discussion of science and religion fails to account for the historicity and practical context of scientific exploration and thus loses sight of science as an *activity*, regarding it instead as 'merely a formal body of knowledge that succeeds or fails to the extent that it matches a mind-independent reality' (Reeves, 20). Likewise, McGrath suggests that the last 30 years have seen a significant 'move away from the notion of a single universal rationality' (McGrath, 2), and contends that any integration of human knowledge 'must be set in the context of an actual and legitimate plurality of methodologies and rationalities across intellectual disciplines, along with a principled refusal to accord privilege to any beyond its own domain of competency' (205).

Three chapters by Reeves give clear overviews of the work of Murphy, McGrath and van Huyssteen, and their attempts to 'legitimise' theology as a rational discipline. The strongest objections are raised against Murphy for her Lakatosian approach, although Reeves notes that 'Murphy herself seems to have recognised the problem of the Lakatosian philosophy of science' (Reeves, 49). None of the critiques is fatal to the authors concerned.

McGrath's book, at its heart, revisits the perennial question of whether one can coherently hold both a scientific and a theological worldview. It explores the 'porous intellectual borders between the natural sciences and Christian theology' (McGrath, 50); how we can hold together insights from multiple disciplines to arrive at 'a grander vision of reality' (McGrath, 74). It moves beyond historical relationships to challenge in depth the assumptions of science having privileged access to or explanatory power over 'the internal connections of events and forces in our world that allow us to understand why things happen' (McGrath, 124). McGrath happens to address many of the concerns expressed in Reeves's book, published in the same year. McGrath explores the different ways in which rationality is deployed across disciplines, for example expanding on the distinction between epistemic and ontic explanations, which respectively make the world intelligible through use of context, and point to ontological structures in the world that are responsible for phenomena. While Reeves objects to what he perceives to be the contradictory nature of critical realism – its inability to account for the provision of valid prediction by incorrect theories and its assumption that 'scientific realism [...] applies across all scientific disciplines and theories' (Reeves, 68) – McGrath, in *Territories of Human Reason*, devotes two chapters (4 and 5) to examining issues of underdeterminism and explanation that provide a far more nuanced response to these critiques. It would be interesting to see Reeves's take on *Territories of Human Reason*.

Reeves comes into his own in his exploration of anti-essentialism. His chapter 6 provides an alternative narrative to the claim that there is a unified explanation for the progress of the scientific revolution. Reeves advocates a historiographical understanding of scientific progress, echoing the hermeneutical method and highlighting the importance of challenging the positivist distinction between truth and knowledge: we must 'renounce transcendence [of truth] in order to study how ideas, practices and institutions are produced naturalistically through contingent historical processes' (Reeves, 112). Applying the rejection of essentialism to the field of science and religion (chapter 7) doesn't mean that the field 'dissolves' (Reeves, 128); instead, it assists the discipline by putting aside the fear of being delegitimised. 'A move beyond the credibility strategy would help [...] by marshalling intellectual capital in more productive ways and help keep the field aligned with developments in other disciplines' (Reeves, 136). Reeves's conclusion thus brings us back to McGrath's call to be 'responsive to the massive shifts in our understanding of the territory of human reason, which require us to leave behind some of the Enlightenment's own methods and assumptions' (McGrath, 226).

In short, McGrath provides a clear and detailed exploration of the issues of rationality and coherence and is a must-read text for those seeking to bring science and religion into dialogue or integration. The strengths of Reeves's book are in providing a context for the rise of the 'superiority' of a unified scientific method, and his work on anti-essentialism. Together, the two books provide an accessible yet demanding introduction to the field of science and religion that highlights the importance of challenging our own epistemic and metaphysical assumptions when undertaking interdisciplinary research.