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Theology, Science and Life by Carmody Grey (London: T&T Clark, 2023), ix+258pp.

When I was studying natural sciences in secondary school, it always fascinated me that all three of the physics teachers were evangelical Christians, the two chemistry teachers were more quietly Christian and agnostic, and all the biology teachers were openly atheistic. Anecdotal as this may be, it captures something of why Carmody Grey's outstanding monograph, *Theology, Science and Life*, should be considered daring for even asking: "Can theology be 'master' even of biology in the twenty-first century?" (p.6) Furthermore, her answer is a "heavily qualified 'yes'—a 'yes' which evacuates that 'mastery' of any dominating or coercive power" (p.235).

Longtime readers of this journal will note the influence of the work of John Milbank in how the above question of 'mastery' is phrased. This is made more explicit in Grey's alternative articulation of the same question: "What would it look like to perform the same exercise for biology that Milbank performs for sociology?" (p.33) To answer this question, Parts I & II of this book describe (Part I) and evaluate (Part II) John Milbank's views on the nature of theology, reason, nature and science. Despite the overall goal of extending Milbank's project to biology, Grey should not be dismissed as a Milbankian acolyte. She openly states, "*I am unsure whether Milbank's position is the 'right' one.* But I think it compelling enough to do some thoughtful work as if it were" (p.5, italics in original). This means that her approach to Milbank is "a sympathetic thinking-through undertaken in a critical spirit" (p.73), such that she allows Milbank's argument to place itself "beyond 'refutation'", but rigorously evaluates it on its own terms, against its own standard of "peace" (pp.72-73, p.80). Grey is to be commended on making this famously unsystematic and often obtuse writer almost crystalline in her concise, but thorough, presentation.

Grey's "test-drive" (p.5) of Milbank's vision of theology's 'mastery' in reference to biology makes a uniquely sustained and in-depth contribution to the burgeoning meta-methodological literature on how to think theologically with and about science (see also, Harrison & Milbank 2022; Perry & Leidenhag, 2023). As such, *Theology, Science and Life* is essential reading for scholars interested in the seismic shifts currently occurring within the field of science-and-religion. In sum, Grey's main argument is that "[t]he Christian task is to notice the theology already at work there [in biology], and hospitably to welcome and/or prophetically disrupt it according to the life of its own narrative of peace." (p.210) In Part III, Grey performs such a task by welcoming the philosophical biology of Hans Jonas as 'theological vitalism' and disrupting it with Christianity's affirmation of the "ontological ultimacy of life narrated as resurrection" (p.212).

What does Milbank say in *Theology and Social Theory* that bears relevance to the natural sciences? In Chapter 1, Grey outlines Milbank's argument against secular accounts of a term like 'natural science'. For Milbank, 'knowledge' and 'reason' are neither universal, nor autonomous; there are no permanent scientific 'facts', no free-standing scientific experiments, and no naturalistic explanations (pp.21-28). This will surely come as a surprise to many, particularly those in science-and-religion who, although accustomed to debating the merit of various accounts of such notions, rarely deny their existence in this way. Yet, according to Grey, Milbank's argument works precisely because it is altogether more radical than standard Christian polemics: "It is not 'naturalism' per se that is rejected but the 'nature' that contemporary scientific naturalism trades on" (pp.31-32). Following the *nouvelle*

théologie movement, “supernature is real nature” (p.32), and “there simply is no nature apart from culture, apart from narrative” (p.30).

Narrative—or rather the specific Christian narrative of creation, redemption and sanctification—is offered as the proper form of theological reason (Chapter 2). A focus on narrative might not seem very innovative—who isn’t into narrative these days? However, Grey argues that what “chiefly distinguishes his [Milbank’s] account from that of other authors who share a fundamental concern with story” (e.g., Charles Taylor), is what Milbank does with difference: “Christianity actually ‘is the coding of transcendental difference as peace’... the narrative which embraces all stories” (p.36). It is as peace, and only as such, that theology is the “master discourse” (p.39).

In Part II, Grey moves into a more evaluative mode, by bringing Milbank into dialogue with his early critics (Janz, Boersma, Flanagan, Coles, Hyman, etc.) and with alternatives from the Radical Orthodoxy school (Hanby, Ward, Oliver, Williams). Grey explores an accusation, made in various early reviews of *Theology and Social Theology*, that Milbank’s vision is “epistemological imperialism” (p.76) which “theocratically eradicate[s]” (p.75) other disciplines. In response, she differentiates between the manner of Milbank’s writing and the content of his ideas. Regarding the former, she concedes that in his early work, Milbank’s “confrontational, even ‘ruthless’” style is a “witness against, and so undermines” his claim that theology is a discourse of peace (p.83). However, she concludes that although Milbank’s work “fails by its own standard...the standard remains” (p.85).

The more important question, for Grey, is “does this conception of knowledge itself undermine natural science?” (p.93) Grey argues that, on the contrary, theology’s ‘mastery’ supports science “by relaxing the modern stranglehold on what counts as proof and reference, and so liberating science from the impossible task of supplying its own grounds” (p.104) and further “elevates ‘science’ as a discourse which is about ‘the real’ in a more expansive way than pure immanence could have dreamt” (p.111). The apparent threat to science is only that theologians, not scientists themselves, get to say what scientific work really means and signifies. This vision “puts science beyond the grip of ‘professional’ scientists” (p.111) and makes “it’s ‘discoveries’...less restricted and parochial in significance than some, both scientists and philosophers, would like” (p.112). It strikes me that it is philosophers of science and not scientists themselves, that are most threatened by Grey’s argument—although, she would likely deny any strong disciplinary distinction here. It is not any of the specific methods or theories of the natural sciences that are of primary concern, but the ontological basis and the metaphysical and ethical consequences of science that Grey’s seeks to replace with Christian theology. This is evident in that her constructive engagement with biology (Part III), is concerned entirely with the philosophical vitalism of Hans Jonas, rather than the methods and theories of contemporary biologists. This is the primary difference between Grey’s work and the recent idea of science-engaged theology (Perry & Leidenhag, 2021).

That it is philosophy of biology, rather than biology itself that is primary in focus should perhaps be unsurprising. Afterall, as Grey ably describes, for Milbank this is all grounded metaphysically by a “Platonic participative framework” (p.49), which dissolves dichotomies between subject and object, nature and culture, thought and language, instrumentalism and realism, and most importantly, immanence and transcendence. As such all human making (called “*poesis*”), which includes the making of scientific knowledge, “is rather ‘the gateway

to transcendence” (p.49), such that “every creature is, so to speak, theologically saturated” (p.54).

This idea is extrapolated through an extended comparison with Michael Hanby’s alternative idea of the sciences as *legitima autonomia* (legitimately autonomous) from theology because God is not creation and *vice versa* (chapter 5). Hanby’s and Milbank’s differing visions for theology’s relationship to the sciences boil down to two different interpretations of *creatio ex nihilo*. For Hanby, the separation of God from the world means that “the claims of evolutionary biology are neither here nor there from a theological point of view” (p.131). By contrast, creation’s participation in God means that for Milbank “theology cannot be indifferent either to creation or to the disciplines, their subject matter and findings and methodologies, because creatures and the knowledge of creatures mediate God to a degree that is unspecifiable *a priori*.” (p.54) Grey reconciles these two visions by arguing that Hanby’s commitment to a “universal structure of reason” can only make sense if it is incorporated “within a Milbankian model” as the *Logos* narrated within the Christian *mythos* (pp.133-140). Since Hanby’s shares with much of the science-and-religion field an interest in apologetics and a worry about “the *conflation* of science and theology,” as manifest in New Atheism and creationism (p.122), Grey’s arguments against Hanby in chapter 5 will be of particular interest to scholars in this field.

It is worth noting that Milbank’s vision has far more radical consequences for theologians than for scientists. In Grey’s words, “theology does not study God, since God is not an object of knowledge, but studies the mediation of God by creatures” (p.60). In this sense, Grey is happy to “deny that theology is ‘a discipline’ at all” (p.143). The theologian “ends up having no specialism ‘of her own’, no peculiar field of competence over which she can claim an expert’s authority” (p.236). Instead, theology’s “task is to narrate that peace for all, again and again, in all the different voices of human knowledge.” (p.146). What does such an admission mean for theologians in practice? Does it even make sense to have professional ‘theologians’ and degrees in theology anymore? For Grey,

“To be a ‘theologian’ is therefore to assume the daunting responsibility of becoming fluent in multiple discourses and disciplines. Practically, this is surely best accomplished by undertaking to gain credible proficiency in one discipline above all. The natural sciences should claim the apprenticeship of more theologians, and theologians should more commonly pursue higher qualifications in natural science than they presently do.” (p.237)

It is striking that, amongst the field of science-and-religion scholars, I can think of plenty of (ex-)scientists who have obtained higher-degrees in theology as a second career, but none who have moved in the other direction.

But does this non-disciplinary, participatory, vision of theology as already speaking in the tones of other disciplines actually work? Or, does saying that everything is theology just leave theologians with nothing to say? There is tremendous risk here—and it is one that Grey fully embraces. The strongest aspect of Grey’s book is that she tries to put all this into practice by re-narrating the phenomenon of ‘life’ as that which most clearly “breaks the bounds of finitude and is prophetic for ontology” (p.15). Life is “the story of being itself” (p.219).

In Part III, Grey’s main interlocutor is Hans Jonas—whose philosophical biology in *The Phenomenon of Life* describes organismic life in anthropomorphic, teleological, panpsychist,

and Darwinian but anti-materialist terms. Although Jonas' himself never used the term, Grey seeks to redeem the concept of 'vitalism' from those who use equate it with Henri Bergson's dualistic *élan vitale* (p.209) and use it as a "derogatory label" for "a kind of biological supernaturalism which is used to set an arbitrary limit on scientific competence" (p.164). Instead, vitalism for Grey is a historically "flexible term" (p.167) that points to a "'meta-theoretical commitment,' a view of life as eluding exact definition" (p.166). In chapters 5 & 6, Grey shows us the first mode of theology's 'mastery'—hospitality —by re-narrating Jonas' vitalism as an already theological biology (pp.210-212). For Grey, Jonas' work shows "how biological 'facts' defy reading in terms of close immanence," and point to their own transcendence (p.174).

The final chapter, chapter 7, offers us the second mode of theology's 'mastery'—prophetic disruption. Grey argues that it is fitting for Jonas' philosophy to be corrected and completed by a Christian theology that declares life's priority and victory over death (e.g., the doctrines of original innocence, fall, and resurrection). Theology corrects Jonas' philosophy because it frees it from problematic entanglements with process-theism (pp.220-221), nihilism (p.223) and political autocracy (pp.223-224). Theology is a fitting completion of Jonas' account of life because if life is to be truly irreducible to non-life as Jonas' supposes, then, contrary to Jonas, "death must be the parasite, the latecomer", and the beginning and end of existence must be life without suffering, violence, or conflict (p.226). In her brief conclusion, Grey points to the need for future work to develop this 'theological vitalism' further by employing exegetical and doctrinal resources (particularly, pneumatology).

That this work started life as a PhD project is only apparent in its almost singular focus on the work of one figure (John Milbank) and its thoroughness, including generous use of footnotes. Yet, the prose is never laborious, and the content is often electrifying. This book is an exemplary way for a young scholar to establish herself in the field.

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