

Reviews

Eschatology and the Technological Future. By Michael S. Burdett. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015. xiv + 251 pp. US \$54.95 (Softcover); also available in hard cover and as an e-book.

There is an easy dichotomy of two discourses: “science and religion,” engaged with claims about knowledge and reality, and “technology and ethics,” engaged with moral concerns about the way we use powers that science has placed in our hands. However, alongside the moral issues, technology also raises philosophical, theological, and anthropological issues—how we understand ourselves and the world, and hence, a need for reflection on “technology and religion.” That is obvious in the study of Michael S. Burdett in his *Eschatology and the Technological Future*. (By the way, Burdett also contributed to the September issue of *Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion* this year with the article “Assessing the Field of Science and Religion: Advice from the Next Generation”).

The first part of Burdett’s study deals with “visionary approaches,” mostly optimistic in orientation: ideas about a technological utopia (changing the world) and transhumanism (changing our existence), with a chapter on science fiction and imagination in between. The second part deals with two theological responses to technological visions of the future, an optimistic, Christocentric one represented by Teilhard de Chardin, and a pessimistic, apocalyptic one represented by Jacques Ellul. The third part, “Philosophical and Theological Issues,” begins with a chapter on another influential thinker, Martin Heidegger, as an opportunity for Burdett to introduce the priority of possibility over actuality (or “ontology”), followed by the key theological proposal, “Possibility and Promise: A Christian Response,” and a concluding chapter, “Hope in a Technological World.” His main inspiration has been George Pattison, but all chapters—including those not signaling so in the chapter title—are engaging particular authors (e.g., Eberhard Jüngel and Richard Kearney on possibility and actuality, and Jürgen Moltmann on hope). The main distinction, introduced early in the book (3), is one between technological futurism—the future we expect to construct, which will arise from the present—and the future as that which will come toward us, as expressed in the German term *Zukunft*, or, to make the theological connotation more explicit, the Latin *adventus*—that which is coming toward us, not of our own making. Thus, Part 1 is about “technological futurism,” whereas Parts 2 and 3 bring in theological discourse of hope and promise (and, I would add, gratitude), and less a discourse of control and development. The book is very well documented, with notes and a bibliography for each chapter separately. It offers a Christian theology in relation to technology.

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God in Cosmic History: Where Science and History Meet Religion. By Ted Peters. Foreward by Rick Warner. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2017. 358 pages. US \$39.95 (Softcover).

Ted Peters is a noted scholar in the science and religion field, professor at the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences and Professor Emeritus in Systematic Theology and Ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. He has written a new book that takes on the Big History of the new historians with the intention to “find the question of God hidden beneath the story” (p. 13). This emerging academic discipline examines history from the Big Bang to the present, focusing on how humankind fits within the universe. Peters introduces the issue of God’s action in cosmic history into the Big History picture. This book begins a dialogue with everyone—the theology community, those at the intersecting science and religion and history–religion fields and those that view Big History through a narrow lens while at the same time purporting to have a broad view of the story. This is one of a very few efforts from theologians to critique and at the same time embellish Big History with the God of history. Peters asks: “Why is the question of God missing in the Big History curriculum? Why is it present in Cosmic History? Regardless of how it gets answered, the question of God represents a profound factor in the story of human consciousness. To select this fact out of the story told by the big historian is to construct an ideology” (p. 166).

The book is craftily structured, divided into two separate but related parts. In the first section, Peters reviews the background of Big History concepts and discusses how these ideas have come to the fore in recent years, preparing the ground for growth of Big History in modern and postmodern thinking. He then places God into this context and takes the reader on a journey through the same history of the universe, now enhanced by theological reflection. Peters’s central idea is that one cannot separate the idea of God (or some form of belief in a Being) from human experience regardless of the volume of history prior to existence of our species. The portion of this section that reflects on human origins and Genesis is especially rich and demonstrates Peters’s superb understanding of the science (and history) and his depth as a theologian. His understanding of the Fall and humanity in Eden based on the Genesis story is juxtaposed with the historian’s quest for the factual stringency, giving a striking vista for an understanding of humanity and the human person.

This second section of the book is engrossed with the “axial question of God”; the notion that consciousness of God stems from the Axial Age of human history, the final period of the premodern era of human history. The concept of transcendent experience is visited from a variety of different religious traditions including Daoism and Confucianism (Chinese tradition), Hinduism and Buddhism (Indian tradition), philosophy (Greek tradition), and the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Mesopotamian–Mediterranean tradition). Using this approach, Peters observes the shaping of history by each one of these faith traditions, both as drivers and as receivers of history. He points out what were the underlying changes that occurred in human thinking with the development of a concept of a deity in each Axial Age society. The hypothesis behind this section

is that “something extraordinary took place in three separate areas of the world—China, India, and the Mesopotamian–Mediterranean region—between 800 and 200 BCE. What occurred in each place was a leap in human consciousness, what philosopher Karl Jaspers calls the axial insight” (p. 186). In this discussion, Peters emphasizes how this transition to belief in God as a Supreme Being reinforced the understanding of transcendence and created a new depth to the human person enabling transition to the modern and postmodern eras. This aspect of humanity’s history, Peters asserts, is not visited by the Big History proponents.

In this second section Peters also takes on several of the difficult issues that have plagued the field of science and religion. The rise of pseudo-science and its struggle with science considerably affected this new field of human thinking, assaulting it with scientism and the evolution controversy, “concerns” about the question of extraterrestrial life, and lack of concern about sustainability of the planet. A minor quibble with the book is the lack of clear connection between the last four topics and the remainder of the text. Despite this, the significance of each of these topics makes them necessary to the overall dialogue among history, religion, and science. The book as a whole, and this discussion especially, make a welcome addition to the on going dialogue(s) in the field of science and religion in the United States. Peters’s insights on evolution and the origins of life, and his theological perspectives on both, are profound and provoking.

Peters insists on the need for dialogue when discussing science, religion, history and perhaps any interdisciplinary topic of this type. In this volume, at the end of each chapter, he postulates poignant review and discussion questions to guide the reader into deeper insights. This makes the book especially relevant for advanced studies that take place in a discussion-type format. For most scholars interested in the interface of disciplines like history, science, and religion, dialogue is one of the most important means for study and development of mutual understanding. It is a joy to see Peters’s effective efforts to fill this need. The book is also well indexed, which contributes to its value as an excellent teaching and reference tool. Finally, it should be noted that the book is simply a pleasure to read; Peters’s easy style and clear voice make it an enjoyable read whether for a class or an afternoon at the beach.

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