

Editorial

SCIENTISM, ONLINE SPIRITUALITY, AND (MIS)READING EVOLUTION

CONSECRATING SCIENCE AND SCIENTISM

This issue features a book symposium on Lisa Sideris's *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (2017). The symposium is largely composed of contributions to a *Zygon* panel held at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Denver, Colorado on November 17, 2018. The panel and this subsequent book symposium have both been organized by Willem Drees, *Zygon Journal's* previous editor. Given the success of that well-attended event and the high quality of the contributions, I would like to commend Drees for having organized this thematic section. We included another AAR contribution, by Colin McGuigan, and invited an additional contribution, by Mary Evelyn Tucker, and we gave Sideris the opportunity to write a comprehensive response to all contributions.

The discussion on Sideris's book—whose main claim is that a set of science-inspired cosmic narratives, some of which have found regular exposition in this journal, problematically proposes to bring humans closer to nature—is wide-ranging. Holmes Rolston fundamentally agrees with Sideris's rejection of “[p]rofoundly impoverished forms of wonder [that] have come to inhabit a significant segment of contemporary discourse in religious environmentalism, science and religion, and a handful of other disciplines caught up in a kind of creeping scientism” (Sideris 2017, 3). But he is worried that she risks throwing out the baby (science) with the bathwater (scientism). Sarah Fredericks finds corroboration in popular reviews of new cosmology literature and cinematography of the sacralization of science over encounters with the natural world. But she also observes that some reviews do highlight or encourage directly valuing and experiencing nature. Donovan Schaefer agrees with Sideris that access to knowledge about nature for laypeople should not necessarily be mediated by an elite class of “wonder-priests” who work at the edge of existing knowledge. But he emphasizes the need for a “partnership with puzzle-solving”—which he argues is an “affective mode” in itself¹—for framing responses to problems such as climate change. Courtney O'Dell-Chaib supports Sideris's concern about “distorted, deracinated wonder,” which is rooted in “hubristic, quasi-authoritarian, and intolerant attitudes toward the nonexpert, nonscientist, and members of other faith communities” (Sideris 2017, 3). But she adds

that Sideris did not yet go far enough in exposing new cosmology as an investment in “white environmentalism,” with insufficient attention being paid to pluralities of encounter and the affective weight of environmental degradation and environmental racism. Colin McGuigan identifies strong affinities between Pope Francis’s and Sideris’s discussions of wonder. But he finds Pope Francis to be more positive about scientific wonder and more vocal about theistic wonder. And finally, Mary Evelyn Tucker shares Sideris’s difficulties with reductionistic science. But she disagrees with the way Sideris has analyzed her *Journey of the Universe* project.

I will not here go into Sideris’s response (she does offer considered reflections on all the issues that have been raised), but instead highlight one important thread of the discussion, which revolves around the pros and cons of a particular form of scientism, that of consecrating science (over and above consecrating nature through direct experience). Since the consecration of science is supposed to underpin environmental behavior, and more widely, environmental public policy, this form of scientism could be brought in connection with “ideological scientism,” which is the subject of the first regular article in this issue, by Christian Baron. Baron—who identifies climate change as requiring a political defense of the role of science in policy making (a point also made by Schaefer and McGuigan and endorsed in her response by Sideris)—argues that one should foster the kind of scientism that is healthy for democracy. His examples are historical: he describes, first, the rise of ideological scientism in England in the early nineteenth century (with an important role for University College London professor of comparative anatomy Robert Grant); subsequently, the fall of ideological scientism with the demise of British eugenics (which had grown through the inspiration of another University College London professor, of eugenics, Francis Galton); and, finally, the resurrection of ideological scientism in the later part of the twentieth century in the form of, for example, new atheism (Dawkins 2006) or postnormal science (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993). All in all, Sideris’s book, the book symposium, and the article by Baron offer food for further thought about scientism.²

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ONLINE SPIRITUALITY

Like the last issue, the present issue contains a thematic section on artificial intelligence (AI). The articles in this issue focus on “online spirituality.” Mohammad Chaudhary investigates the way the world is getting secularly reenchanting through the introduction of “intelligent virtual assistants.” He refers to Charles Taylor’s (2007) analysis of “disenchantment,” the process through which the world got less inhabited with extra-human agencies, and he sees the reverse happening now through the development of augmented reality. Where people increasingly come to expect augmented features for a growing number of places and things, they may imagine and discover


more, that is, their world may become more “enchanted.” William Young, in his article, after giving a broad overview of the digital delivery of religious “products,” zooms in specifically on intelligent virtual assistants that are designed to work as “digital clergy.” He claims that clergy tasks such as sermon writing and pastoral care could be automated using AI if there are sufficient incentives to do so.

(MIS)READING EVOLUTION ONTO RELIGIOUS TEXTS

The thematic section on “Evolution and Religious Texts” brings together two articles, one from the Islamic and one from the Christian tradition, that try to come to grips with how evolution should or should not be read onto religious texts. Shoaib Malik is critical of how authors—notably John William Draper at the end of the nineteenth century—have misread classical works by Ibn Khaldūn, Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, al-Jāhiz, and the Brethren of Purity as suggesting that humans have evolved from lower forms of species. James Collin walks a different route for a set of Christian texts; he offers an Irenaean reading of Romans 5 and Genesis that purports to link soul-making and the idea of theosis to contemporary evolutionary biology.

OTHER ARTICLES

Besides the Baron article already mentioned, this issue contains two more articles in the general articles section. Raymond Hausoul offers an overview of where the conversation on theology and cosmology currently stands, and he calls for further interdisciplinary enrichment. Bradford McCall offers us a fresh piece of process theology, where he thinks with Alfred North Whitehead about the role of the immanently creative spirit. Finally, two books reviews, on books by Andrew Michael Flesher and Carlo Rovelli, complete the issue. Again, I would say, this issue is enough to chew on . . .

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NOTES

1. I made a similar claim about the role of emotion in scientific wonder in Petersen (2014).
2. In recent years, two edited volumes have appeared on scientism—Williams and Robinson (2015) and de Ridder et al. (2018)—that contain relevant contributions to the appraisal of various forms of scientism.

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