

Reviews

Deprovincializing Science and Religion. By Gregory Dawes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 57 pages. \$20.00. (Paperback).

Gregory Dawes' *Deprovincializing Religion and Science* (2021), which talks about a perennial topic in philosophy of religion regarding the relationship between science and religion, is a 57-page part of the Cambridge Elements Series in Philosophy of Religion.

Much literature that discusses the relationship between religion and science deals specifically with the relationship between Christianity and modern science—whether promoting a conflict, integration, dialogue, or independence thesis. For example, take Alvin Plantinga's *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (2015), which offers an integration thesis. Or take Jerry A. Coyne's *Faith Versus Fact* (2015), which offers a conflict thesis. Both are referring to science in terms of modern science and to religion in terms of Christianity and, specifically, Americanized Christianity. *Deprovincializing Religion and Science* attempts to understand that particular discourse (i.e., between Christianity and modern science) as a small part of a broader discourse: regarding two different ways humans perceive the natural world (1). For Dawes, modern science is only a part of the process of knowing for humans who, fundamentally, make use of empirical observation of the world; Christianity, on the other hand, is only a part of a process of understanding the world by reference to metapersons—gods, spirits, and ancestors. Thus, the conflict—if there is any conflict—is between what Dawes defines as *scientia* and religion.

Scientia is a broader term than modern “science.” Dawes describes it as a communal tradition of efforts to understand the world through empirical observations that produce general principles about how the world generally works (6). Dawes categorizes it into four traditions, namely, (1) *scientia* as traditional knowledge, which we might find in many indigenous or traditional communities, (2) *scientia* as an integrated cosmology like we could find in ancient China, (3) *scientia* as natural philosophy, which we might find in Medieval Europe, and (4) *scientia* as specialized knowledge or what we understand today as modern science.

Likewise, “religion” is defined by Dawes more broadly as a communal tradition of efforts in dealing with metapersons to gain an advantage in the world for oneself or for a group (7). Dawes categorizes religion into two forms, namely, (1) diffused religion and (2) institutionalized religion. Diffused religion differs from institutionalized religion in that it is subtler in people's daily lives either in small-scale societies (e.g., indigenous communities) or in larger societies such as ancient China.

Later, from Chapters 2–5, Dawes tries to elaborate the relation between those traditions of *scientia* and traditions of religion along four dimensions. Those dimensions are (1) a cognitive dimension regarding the content of scientific theories or religious doctrines, (2) a teleological dimension regarding the goals of each *scientia* or religious traditions, (3) an organizational dimension regarding any differing activities of each body, and (4) an epistemological dimension regarding types

of knowledge, idioms, and sources of knowledge. In short, Dawes shows us in those four chapters that each tradition in the scientific category is related to religions in a unique way: we must not generalize that there is one thesis that will describe these relations—whether conflict, integration, and so on. It is important to note that for Dawes, a clear distinction between scientific and religious beliefs developed first only in Medieval Europe, influenced by Aristotle, who understood theology as a science that was based solely on divine revelation (27).

The lesson is this. When someone tries to generalize her claims regarding the relationship between science and religion, we first need to ask by quoting David N. Livingstone: “Which Science? Whose Religion?”

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Divine Action and the Human Mind. By Sarah Lane Ritchie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 384 Pages. \$120.00. (Hardcover)

Modern science has been hugely successful in its observation and understanding of the natural world, but this very success has led to what the American philosopher John Searle has called “the heroic age-of-science maneuver,” that is, the confident assumption that science can, and will, explain everything. Such positivist faith in the scientific method has served to undermine any idea of theistic intervention within what is believed to be a closed physical system: the idea of God becomes redundant as a causal explanation of what are seen as entirely autonomous processes in the natural world. Indeed, because the “laws of nature” are perceived by many as immutable, the notion that God could, even in principle, somehow break in from the outside and “violate” the very laws he himself has established seems contradictory.

In her monograph *Divine Action and the Human Mind*, Sarah Lane Ritchie, a Research Fellow in Science and Theology at the University of St Andrews, tackles head-on the problem of how “divine action” might still be possible in such a closed universe. She is at pains to defend a form of “theistic naturalism,” a notion which will strike many as oxymoronic or even bizarre. After all, in philosophy, the term “naturalism” usually implies the non-existence of the supernatural in general, and the divine in particular.

Ritchie is especially hostile to any suggestion that God can act through the human mind as a separate spiritual entity from the body. Her avowed aim is to refute mind–body dualism, and to offer instead a robust defense of a physicalism, which reduces mind to brain. For her, it is clear that “the mind *just is* the brain–body–environment system” (14). Consciousness should not be regarded as in any sense an immaterial phenomenon. Indeed, she confidently asserts that, while it once appeared “obvious” that the mind is inherently spiritual, today the “consensus” among philosophers and neuroscientists is that physicalism is the most convincing explanation for human mentality (214). What she apparently fails to realize, however, is that, even if her claims about such a consensus were true, mere agreement among scholars is no guarantee of truth. Dualism remains very much alive,

notwithstanding its considerable philosophical difficulties. But Ritchie appears unable to appreciate that there are even more profound problems with physicalism. The “hard problem” of how consciousness can emerge from non-conscious physical processes is simply brushed aside. And she never really comes to grips with the central role of intentionality to consciousness, nor with the intrinsic inability of matter to possess it, or of computers to ascend from the execution of algorithms to the grasping of concepts. Moreover, scientific theories are themselves artifacts of human consciousness and rationality. The attempt to use science to show that consciousness and rationality are nothing more than physical processes only serves to vitiate any confidence we might have in science itself, and in our capacity to search for and identify truth through the scientific method. Seemingly “rational” explanations of the physical *fons et origo* of consciousness are thus in danger of becoming self-contradictory. Consciousness is not what needs explaining; consciousness is what *does* the explaining.

Upholding naturalism is crucial to Ritchie’s project because of her desire to reject the “standard causal joint model” of divine action. The term “causal joint” was coined by the English philosophical theologian, Austin Farrer, and refers to the point at which divine action impinges on the world. Ritchie rightly observes that the idea of a transcendent God intervening in the world from outside becomes deeply problematic once we view nature as governed by prescriptive natural laws. A less rigid model of laws that perceives them not as prescriptions, but as descriptive of mere general regularities, is unlikely to cause such difficulties. Perhaps the whole notion of physical laws that cannot be violated is itself fundamentally flawed. However, clearly indebted as she is to the work of process theologians, Ritchie seeks to promote the concept of theistic naturalism, which emphasizes God’s immanence. The physical universe, she maintains, “participates in the immanent God” (336). Unfortunately, this raises a key difficulty, which she herself acknowledges. Namely, any theistic naturalism that embraces the scientific picture of reality, but which, at the same time, tries to place it into a broader theistic context, is “self-admittedly unfalsifiable and untestable” and thus becomes “wholly immune to scientific critique” (336). Ritchie attempts to extricate herself from this problem by claiming, in more traditional theological fashion, that as well as being immanent, God is also transcendent. This results in a tension between a deistic model, which perceives the physical universe as entirely autonomous, and a pantheism, which portrays God as within the universe, but also outside it. The temptation of sliding from here into a Spinozan pantheism is, of course, very great indeed.

In an effort to avoid such pantheism, Ritchie accepts the need for divine transcendence: “There must be a clean ontological break between God and nature” (247). However, the problem with this solution is that, by affirming the ontological reality of a transcendent God, this commits her to the reality of the non-physical, a fact that only serves to undermine the main argumentative thrust of her book. For how can a monism which, by definition, excludes the possibility of an immaterial mind be sustained once the metaphysical reality of the non-physical has been conceded? Ritchie began by wrestling with the problem of divine action within a closed, autonomous universe, but her philosophical aim of trying to hold together both naturalism and a strong sense of God as ontologically

distinct from the world appears contradictory. If we are prepared to acknowledge the non-physical reality of God, what stops us from accepting the non-physical reality of mind and consciousness? Sadly, one looks in vain throughout the book for a satisfactory answer to this question. That said, the author has produced an intriguing volume that, one might hope, will stimulate fruitful dialogue between scholars working at the interface between science and religion.

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How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others. By T. M. Luhrmann. Princeton, NJ, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020. xv + 235 pages. \$29.95. (Hardback).

Religion continues to be an important topic and a subject worthy of high-level research. It occupies a discrete but constant position in the catalogues of the main academic publishers. I would not have imagined 20 years ago that religion could draw so much attention from different scientific areas and absorb so many resources from well-endowed research programs, beyond the narrow theological niche, the truly “dismay science”! Indeed, any attempt to update the dialogue between science and religion should take into account those developments. In addition, there is a practical aspect often neglected in that subject area, I mean the real impact that religion has on the lives of millions of people: religion is not just a curious and puzzling human feature still surviving in advanced societies, but a consistent way of providing meaning and hope for many people, and helping them cope with stress and adversity.

A big issue arising in the current study of religion concerns the most appropriate approach to this human trait; in part it depends upon what the researcher is looking for, or which is his/her available toolkit. Combining different methods and applying distinct theoretical frameworks in parallel, we can probably ensure a more fitting outcome and get a better knowledge of such a complex reality.

Tanya Luhrmann is a distinguished anthropologist who has published several studies on religious phenomena after extensive fieldwork in many different settings. Her intent is to better know the more intense or committed forms religion still assumes in our time, and their impact on people's lives. Her approach is empathetic, never disengaged or distant. She tries even to experience and live as the people she observes and tries to understand. This is probably anthropology of religion at its best, in continuity with the big classic names that have rendered this discipline a source of deep insights. The book is indeed enjoyable and it becomes an invitation to the reader to get involved in a world that, even if not his or her own, becomes much closer after reading it.

The basic idea of this book is that religion does not just accumulate and uphold beliefs, but through its rituals and practices provides access to a different level or dimension of reality—what Luhrmann calls a *paracosm*—that allows for rich interaction, mostly positive, though she does not ignore its dark side. The suggested approach seeks to explain how the divine, or the transcendent reality,

becomes more concrete and available to those who are more gifted or undertake harder discipline and manage to develop that access.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Always drawing upon her rich repertoire of collected data and experiences, Luhrmann starts by introducing what she calls “The Faith Frame.” The basic point is that religious beliefs are not entirely spontaneous and that they need cognitive investment and practical enforcement through various means, a point that has challenged cognitivists studying religion. What is important is to notice that different “kinds of realism” coexist in the minds of different people, and that religious beliefs focus on a specific access to reality, a realm in which “gods matter”—a point that needs to be recalled time after time. The *faith frame* implies entering a different mode of thinking and looking at life. To that end some faculties, like imagination, come into play. Indeed, the *frame* becomes like a very special play, in which one can expect that things will acquire a distinct and positive meaning despite the odds, and after considerable personal investment. This is a very different—and much better—way to approach the counterintuitive character of religious beliefs than usually do the cognitivists.

The second chapter is devoted to ways *paracosms* or alternative worlds are constructed, for instance, resorting to good narratives, which move and involve us, to achieve a level of participation in the plot and let us feel how God becomes an interacting “available Other.” Religions then establish “rules of engagement” to access the divine; the faithful learn a particular language or a special code, which allows them to participate in the right way in that particular religious culture, and to interact with the divine in the shared *faith frame*; but again, this is not spontaneous, but chosen, and it usually entails some effort to access that reality.

The third chapter develops an idea that concludes the previous one: we need to pay attention to talent and training to understand how people gain access to a rewarding alternative reality. The first aspect is described in terms of “absorption,” a psychological category that refers to some special ability to sense transcendence, and as such is not available to everybody in the same measure; it is more akin to the traditional idea of “mysticism.” Training is more universal; it is like cultivating an “inner sense” and everybody, through the right practice, could get better access to the divine or experience its presence and effects. Both ideas express a human natural capacity for religion as something more concrete and lived, but much more demanding than other recent theories have described.

Chapter 4 proposes a sort of phenomenology on how the religious mind manages to perceive the divine in its own terms, and to sense it in a special and distinct way, “between inner and outer.” Once more the author’s fieldwork assists her in describing how different Pentecostal communities in the United States, Africa, and India, perceive the divine in specific ways and feel its effects according to distinct scripts.

The fifth chapter looks for evidence about how “Gods and Spirits respond.” Here, the concept of “spiritual kindling” is introduced to describe activities that help in rendering the divine present and interacting. The body plays a big role besides the mind; but cultural and social contexts exert their influence too, shaping spiritual experiences and giving rise to a differentiated phenomenology that influences that perception. In this way, people reach some evidence of the divine corresponding to “their own manner of faith,” which influences their perceptions.

Luhrmann concludes this chapter with the claim: “Thus the secular and faithful may find that their most basic experience of the world drifts apart” (35).

The sixth chapter is devoted to prayer and how it works for its practitioners. This is a test for Luhrmann’s view: how religious practice gives rise to a distinct dimension with its own codes and its own effects involving the whole person. In her own words: “Prayer changes people because prayer alters the way people attend to their own mental processes” (139). This activity demands inner attention, an act of deeper reflection. Prayer displays different expressions: gratitude, confession, asking, and adoration. These are called “metacognitive effects,” rendering that activity effective and helpful.

The last chapter focuses on how God responds to the faithful’s efforts, and how that response is perceived at different levels. Indeed, if Gods “feel real” their effects must be felt as no less real, in the sense that they respond and change one’s life. Religion is about learning how gods and spirits respond and become subjects of rich and intense interaction. The concept of “connection” serves to better describe that feeling, an idea that conjoins the sensed closeness to the divine and growing social links, giving rise to new forms of relationship. This chapter includes some caution concerning religion’s dark side, a point introduced to warn about dangers associated with this mostly positive dynamic.

This is a beautiful book; a must-read for those trying to understand religion beyond the short-sightedness we feel in other recent attempts to describe religion in scientific, and hence very reductive terms. Since the author builds on her extensive fieldwork and experience, the reader feels directly involved in those similar lived experiences. Religion becomes something more familiar and normal, and less weird or alien, even if many cases described reflect on the more intensive and committed religious expressions now available, especially in Western areas. Luhrmann teaches how the religious mind works in a more convincing way than other attempts to describe these intriguing cognitive forms. After reading her book we can feel how other analyses have been distracted by one or two trees and were unable to see the forest, the religious experience in its complexity.

Another interesting point is that Luhrmann provides in this book a new theoretical model, a framework that allows her to observe and analyze religious processes in a more fitting way. I think, for instance, about Marian apparitions in Catholic settings, which have abounded in recent decades, and could be seen as a way of “making real,” very similar to the patterns the book describes.

Religion in this book is much more complex than in so many attempts at scientific description, and integrates cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural dimensions. This is an important reminder for those studying religion, who are called to invest more in multilevel approaches and to be less distracted by very limited traits. In any case, this book invites the reader to pursue a research program better able to understand beliefs beyond their mere cognitive content, and more as complex expressions that involve emotions and cultural framing. Indeed, the insights Luhrmann suggests in her essay are worthy of being applied in non-religious realms, where we—through belief and believing—render real what is otherwise strange and unassailable, even in some scientific areas. What about economic models that need to appear as real? How to render real very abstract matter models like “string theory”? What is the relationship between believing, modeling,

and trying to access complex and hidden aspects of reality? Believing—we know now—is not an exclusively religious feature, or a limited cognitive ability, but an unavoidable way for humans to deal with reality and to relate to others.

The last point invites reflection and application by those engaged in science, religion, and theology. First, because much depends on how we conceive religion, which is very culturally mediated and lately disrupted by advances in its scientific study. Religion, as Luhmann describes it, deserves a specific treatment when dealing with science or when trying to make sense of science. And second, because the “making real” exercise is not a private and exclusively religious activity, but a necessary exercise for scientists—social and natural—and other people who ought to make sense of many ideal representations or models, which must “become real” as a condition of their effective working.

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