

## Reviews

*Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Conscious Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering.* B.Wesley J.Wildman and Kate J.Stockly. New York:Macmillan. 395 pp. \$29.99. (Hardcover).

Wesley Wildman and Kate Stockly present a fascinating overview of new “religious technologies”. The book takes its readers on a tour through various new technologies that enhance religious experience and awareness. Below I discuss some of the central topics and make some critical remarks.


The central goal of the book is explaining how various technologies can contribute to religious practices and experiences. The technologies range from mildly intrusive (online churches, neuro-feedback) to intrusive (brain stimulation, mind-altering substances). Some technologies have been with us for centuries (e.g., ayahuasca-medicine), while others are brand new (e.g., virtual reality). All technologies allow for *enhancement* of normal human awareness. Some allow for new experiences of spiritual entities, others for closer togetherness with fellow humans, and still others for increased well-being. Although the goals or results differ, all technologies allow humans to go where normal, non-enhanced human minds cannot go.

Most of the book consists of narratives on how new religious technologies were developed or discovered. The authors have developers or inventors explain how they came up with their idea and how they took it to the market. Some have turned their idea into (highly) profitable startups. Some of the chapters read like transcripts of TED-talks or sales pitches. While this increases readability and clarity, it sometimes paints an overly positive picture. The authors try to remedy this by discussing some point of criticism. For example, they discuss how a device called “Thync” was taken off the market. Overall, the authors present a very positive case for most of new technologies. The discussion on technologies that tamper with the human brain are well embedded in data from cognitive neuroscience regarding how the human brain works and processes information. For example, the authors show how neurofeedback devices allow subjects to coordinate brain waves to relieve anxiety, depression or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

A recurring theme is how new religious technologies allow for a ‘fast lane’ toward success. The authors note that religious or spiritual practice usually takes up a considerable amount of time and energy to achieve some success (a different mindset, reduced stress, happiness, etc.). Many technologies allow users to cut corners and speed up the whole process. The authors suggest that this is one of the great merits of the new technologies. They argue that experiences or changes induced by technologies are not less authentic or less reliable than older practices. The arguments serve well against unreflective, conservative views toward new religious technologies.

The overall focus is on introducing new religious technologies and arguing that they provide a safe, fast alternative (or boost to) traditional religious

practices. Far less attention is given to questions regarding truth or reliability. For many practitioners across traditions, spiritual practices are a means to get into contact with a higher reality. An obvious question is whether experiences or states that are clearly artificially induced by tampering with the brain (e.g., through brain stimulation) or the brain's ecological setting (e.g., through virtual, online churches) can lead to veridical experiences or genuine contact with that higher reality. While technology does not prevent subjects from having veridical experiences, the threat of distortion or manipulation of normal information processing is lurking. Some discussion of this question would have been appropriate.

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*Cyborg Theology: Humans, Technology and God.* By Scott A. Midson. London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017. 272 pp. £135.00. (Hardcover).

In the beginning, God created humans in Eden according to God-self; we are creatures bearing *imago Dei* ("image of God"), destined for a peaceful, natural paradise. In contemporary times, this Genesis-based narrative faces a rival from post-/transhumanism and its gospel: emerging technologies will free us from our prison of meat, thus unleashing God-like powers. There appears to be an inevitable antagonism between technophobia and technophilia, as we wrestle with staying human in a high-tech culture everyday. Scott Midson, however, wants to erase the boundaries demarcating human, nature, and technology. A lecturer at the University of Manchester and a member of the Lincoln Theological Institute, Midson uses the cyborg figure in his maiden book to examine how technology is portrayed at the intersection of theological anthropology and posthumanism.

*Cyborg Theology* provides a three-part theological response to Donna Haraway's (1991) essay "A Cyborg Manifesto", and campaigns for the recognition of cyborg theology as a nascent field. Part I concerns the question "what are humans?". It lays down the theological parameters and evaluates the three versions of *imago Dei*: are we humans by virtue of something we have (substantive), something we do (functional), or some relation we enter into (relational)? In doing so, Midson models the three-way relationships between human, nature, technology, and maps the challenges posed by post-/transhumanism. Part II asks "what are cyborgs?". Midson rejects the symbol of cyborgs as just physical beings (i.e., human-machine fusions), arguing instead that any being living in a complex, organo-cybernetic system is a cyborg. Hence, insofar as we cannot abstract ourselves from information systems, we are all cyborgs already. Part III brings the two fields together, addressing "how would theological anthropology accommodate cyborgs?". To this end, Midson rearticulates biblical narratives (e.g. the garden of Eden) through the symbolism of cyborg to arrive at a cyborg theology. The book has a negative and positive conclusion: it rejects a substan-

tial and anthropomorphic conception of human nature, favoring a relational account that captures the non-discreteness of human, natural, and technological beings.

Midson presents a good case against the substantive account of *imago Dei* with regard to cyborgs. On what separates humans from non-humans, he observes that “[a] human with a pacemaker is still regarded as a human and not a cyborg, whereas in [science-fiction], a human with computerised, mechanised or cybernetic appendages is portrayed as in some way [...] superhuman” (190–1). Indeed, *Cyborg Theology* is populated with case studies that debunk the legitimacy of using human nature as a “gate of difference” (190) for assimilating or rejecting technology.

Further, Midson has a talent for sniffing out conflicts in other scholars’ commitments. In evaluating Philip Hefner’s application of *imago Dei*—“created co-creators”—Midson concludes that “Hefner clings to notions of (human) nature and identifies technology within that realm: human autonomy and creativity are at the heart of human-technological nature” (154). The charge here is that Hefner is guilty of misrepresenting his cyborgian position as relational when in fact it is closer to a substantive approach because he relies on, rather than abandons, conventional categories. If Midson is right, then we should think twice before labeling technophilic theologians as friends of cyborg theology.

Another highlight of *Cyborg Theology* is its use of fabulation as methodology. By *fabulation*, Midson refers to “stories that sediment and become histories” (14); such stories can be both fictional (e.g. *Frankenstein*) and non-fictional (e.g. the Cold War). And so despite the seeming irrelevance of Eden and other theological narratives in a secular age, Midson advocates that “[we] cannot reject [them] because they are part of the rich tapestry of narratives that we draw on in making sense of ourselves and the world, where technologies are an inseparable (and imploded) part of both” (196). One need to look no further than science-fiction books and films that portray a post-apocalyptic utopia for humanity—*Interstellar* (2014) comes to mind—to find familiar notions of salvation that seek to deliver us from a fallen world.

That said, because the book engages so extensively with existing scholars (albeit critically), it ultimately came across as a commentary, less so charting a new territory. The target author, Donna Haraway, appeared in the main text almost 300 times, averaging to more than once per page; fabulation as a methodology was first developed by Elaine Graham; working at the intersection of theology and technology, Noreen Hertzfeld had been emphasizing a relational approach since 2002. Likewise, how Midson plans to bring cyborg theology into existence is also regrettably brief. Most chapters serve to defend the negative thesis. But the positive thesis—that of an interconnected, non-anthropocentric approach—is only explicitly spelled out in the conclusion in the form of eight principles for further research. One such bullet point is this: “A decentred approach to the field(s) in question that does not prioritise any particular group but strives to recognise the ways that multiple actors have equal importance and influence” (199). The devil is in the details; these principles come across as too abstract and critical, and serve more as proscription rather than prescription. As such,

Midson's emphasis on system de-construction creates a gap more so than fills one. But this act of demolition also frees up room to build something new, a research opportunity most welcome for those inclined toward system construction.

Overall, *Cyborg Theology* illustrates the importance of the cyborg figure to theology. The book succeeds in tearing down a substantive anthropology of human nature, though less so in constructing a new field. It is suitable for technologists and theologians interested in collaborating with one another, and is of particular interest to science and religion scholars at a postgraduate level or above.

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*Religion and the Environment: An Introduction.* By Susan Power Bratton.  
New York: Routledge, 2021. 274 pp. \$42.95. (Paperback).

Susan Power Bratton's *Religion and the Environment* examines the role played by religion at the interface of scientific and policy level issues emerging from concerns about the environment. It looks at the dialogues between faith and science in the context of environmental concepts, such as sustainability and conservation. Bratton defines religion and its functions not simply as what people believe in, but critically analyzes the categories of the "sacred," the "ordinary," and the "symbols" (p. 9) that characterize religion. She argues that it is in dwelling on the multiple meanings and values of these terms that both the concepts of environment and religion (together and individually) be made sense of. Bratton is of the idea that religion cannot be separated from its embedded environmental values, and throughout the book she brings up instances from historical, theological, and contemporary human engagement with the environment to advance her arguments.

Bratton's primary concern in the book lies in the question of "why and how religion influences environmental attitudes and the adoption of green practices" (p. 9). Along with this, she explores the role played by cosmology and spirituality in contemporary interactions with the environment. She specifically studies the concept of "faith" and its built-in potential to retain important information about the natural environment. She uses faith further to enquire its role in attaching value to natural objects and processes. The book engages with discourses on classical Greek, Christian, pagan, and other religious treatises, social justice movements, urban infrastructures, healing and wellness practices, concerns about climate change, environmental activism, and dialogues between science and religion. It does not abandon these engagements, but consciously connects them to an intricate whole, which seeks to understand religion through a discourse on environment, and environment through religion.

The book is divided into twelve chapters, each examining one symbol, trope, or practice in detail by exposing its environmental values, as can be studied alongside its connection with religion. Religion here is both the context as well as the cause. Bratton discusses topics like sustenance of indigenous modes of agriculture, species preservation, and community-based procedures of harvesting

and conservation, where she contextualizes religion as a major regulator behind the sustenance of these practices. The religious context in which these practices are situated becomes a site to contest their scientific validity. Further, an enquiry into the legitimacy of the ethical considerations and moral codes that religion approves of leads to a discussion on religious professionalism in relation to animism and shamanism, where Bratton says that knowledge about the environment is intricately connected to elements of cognition (p. 27). The first five chapters dwell on the connections that community-based sustenance practices have on the environment, and the multiple “religious codes” (p. 29, 36) that soldiers on theological doctrines. Chapters six to eight discuss religious watershed management practices, preservation of species through sanctuaries, and the making of the sacred space and modern mega-cities, respectively. In these chapters, Bratton moves back and forth in history to demonstrate how environmental ideas took shape against changing cultural values. In Chapter nine, the concept of religious healing is explored against the backdrop of planetary healing where Bratton interestingly brings in the Gaia hypothesis. Chapter ten broadly tackles the question of climate scepticism that according to Bratton can also be interpreted through faith-based networking systems that has historically been effective in mobilizing support for climate-related causes. Chapter eleven serves more like a pre-conclusion, where Bratton brings up some of her earlier discussed arguments to closure. This chapter deals with the conceptual approaches and models that envision a planetary future and discusses religious environmental activism as aligned with contemporary political and social movements.

Towards its conclusion, the book ushers toward the possibility of initiating more discussion on eco-religious discourses that Bratton believes will help shape the “character and vision of environmental trailblazers” (p. 216). This vision encompasses faith and spirituality as cursory proponents of environmental consciousness. It steers away from the dominant positioning of the Anthropocene and concerns about environmental degradation in the domain of science. But at the same time, Bratton acknowledges and incorporates the variegated ways from which religion itself can be understood. She does not homogenize the idea of religion to better accommodate her arguments, but on the contrary, brings out its diversity to support them. Her idea of religion is not devoid of science either. She situates eco-religious consciousness within a robust scientific framework that is informed of how religions of the world perceive nature. This fuses together notions of nature, natural and religion, by validating the existence of different modes of knowledge (p. 32) that coexist alongside laboratory-oriented scientific analysis of the environment.

*Religion and the Environment* encompasses a wide range of topics under its canopy with erudite perfection. While the book presents well-founded and substantial arguments about the connections and negotiations between religion and nature, the content of individual chapters echoes a repetition of similar objectives and premises about the environmental roots in religious practices that appears like a verbose when read as a continuous whole. The overall structure of the book, with each chapter outlining its key concepts in the beginning, the interspersed and recurrent description boxes and figures that breaks the otherwise monotony of the written word. The author’s choice of highlighting important

and unusual terms, and use of lucid language, makes the book a very convenient and accessible text for academics as well as nonacademics interested in discourses on environmentalism and or religion.

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*Secularization*. By Charles Turner. Abingdon and New York: Routledge. 2020. 168 pp. \$46.95. (Paperback). \$160.00. (Hardcover).

Charles Turner offers us what he calls a “walking tour” around the topic of secularization. Beginning in Istanbul with the puzzle of a burqa-wearing reader of Baudelaire, Turner is neither a knight on a quest for a thesis nor a negligible intellectual flaneur; he is in fact a British sociologist, intellectual historian, and political theorist who is fluent in German, Polish and Turkish. His book is, on one level, a compact but advanced introduction to the intellectual history, social science, and philosophy of secularization. This rather modest guise in fact allows Turner to perform a double service. Those of us somewhat new to the area certainly get an overview and a form of pedagogical guidance. Many of the residents are met briefly but without the caricature which can blight so many books where major theorists merely pass in review. See the excellent section on Hans Blumenberg, science, and mythology (76–80). This is very rewarding for hardworking newcomers. However, a second and perhaps *higher* purpose emerges in the enormous terrain Turner manages to encompass so tightly.

After the short Preface in Istanbul, Chapter 1, “The career of a concept”, describes the meaning of the terms “secularization” and “religion” in so far as they have varied according to the contexts of their usages, before and after the rise of science. Turner’s concern at the beginning of the book is to emphasize the challenge we face in dealing with such a slippery concept. He then moves on to consider three kinds of writer on secularization: classical social theorists, modern sociologists and post-war philosophers. Chapter 2, “Secularization and ambivalence”, turns to Tocqueville, Marx, Max Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel—founding fathers of the social sciences—as exemplars for thinking with a sense of “paradox and nuance” about the topic. Chapter 3, “Four sociological secularization gospels”, contrasts the classical theorists with four sociologically assertive treatments of “the secularization thesis” from the 1960s by Bryan Wilson, Peter Berger, Phillip Rieff, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Chapter 4, “Secularization and philosophy” follows a range of European philosophers, especially Karl Löwith, Eric Voeglin, Carl Schmitt, Hans Kelsen, Hans Blumenberg, and René Girard in their negotiations between religion, science, and society in the years following World War Two.

We are then brought up to date in Turner’s discussions of the critical and explanatory factors in recent work on the secularization debate and well-chosen case-

studies and examples. Chapter 5, “The revenge of history and sociology”, discusses a range of dimensions of secularization that preoccupy more recent discussion; these include the role of “grand narratives”, the explanatory power of gender, sexuality, urbanization, and war, the nature of religious pluralism, and attempts to discuss examples of secularization that are wary of sociological and philosophical generalizations. Chapter 6, “Fundamentalism, zombie religion, secular religion”, discusses Islam in Turkey and France and then, via islamophobia, the possibility that avowedly non-theological, “scientific” principles of social organization—*laïcité* in France after the Enlightenment, “Scientific Communism”, and allegedly Darwinian Nazism—might in fact represent new religious forces. “An inconclusive conclusion” which forms Chapter 7 sees Turner end the book by recommending a spirit of intellectual compromise—between religion and science, between the secular and the sacred. If we avoid certain dangers, he says, we might avoid the ideological “absolutism” (155) that has caused so many problems in the past.

That the book should be “inconclusive” in no way means it is without force. For example, the first chapter tells us what the classical social theorists thought about religion or its alleged decline. But the studied “ambivalence” Turner finds in these writers does away with the simplistic idea that secularization *just is* the destruction of religion by science (because science is *necessarily* in conflict with religion). This ambivalence comes from Turner’s cleverness as an intellectual historian. He operates, I suggest, with two complementary modes of commentary.

Consider how Turner approaches Max Weber. There is the “official” Weber, who appears to have accepted the simplistic version of the secularization idea (32). But then there is the Weber for whom the historical processes of secularization, scientific rationalization, and “disenchantment” require we cling to “the demon that holds the very fibres of your life” (36) in a personal struggle for meaning. This changes how we see intellectual history and how we see secularization. Turner does not offer us, through Weber or anyone else, a solution to a “science versus religion” dilemma. Instead, he thinks that the very practice of intellectual history can give us the historical awareness we need to begin to transcend false dilemmas. Turner writes about thinkers who are, recognizably, *people* in the midst of their own struggles with ideas.

This personal mode of commentary undercuts the “absolutism” he warns against in his final chapter. Warning, indeed, is the other mode. “Absolutism” allows individuals to escape responsibility for their own thinking about the relationship between religion, science, and society because it seems to license the same kind of ideas to dominate every sector of our lives, and Turner warns that this is literally dangerous. Twentieth-century militarism, the secular in uniform, he suggests, gives us the harshest of examples (164–5). But there are lighter notes when Turner warns wryly against the bombast of more recent writers who might not be in full control of what they are saying about “the spatializing gaze of the Bangkok flaneur” (Turner quoting Taylor, 94) or “this minimalist biopolitical modality” (Turner quoting Mellor & Schilling, 153). This sort of thing, Turner says, is “an occupational hazard of cultural stud-

ies” (94). A few unnerving encounters should not put us off exploring a rich city.

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*Theology and Science in the Thought of Ian Barbour: A Thomistic Evaluation for the Catholic Doctrine of Creation.* By Joseph R. Laracy. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2021. 346 pages. \$70.57. (Hardcover).

The Reverend Joseph R. Laracy, S.T.D is a Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Newark and an Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology, Seton Hall University. In *Theology and Science in the Thought of Ian Barbour: A Thomistic Evaluation for the Catholic Doctrine of Creation*, Fr. Laracy uses fundamental theological criteria to critically examine whether the epistemic, metaphysical, and theological approach of the American Protestant theologian and physicist, Ian Graeme Barbour (1923–2013) can enrich the *dialogue* and *integration* of the Catholic doctrine of creation with the natural sciences. Laracy takes up this task in response to teachings from recent Popes on the importance for Catholic theologians to open a dialogue between science and faith in order to “engage truth wherever it may be found” (3). Barbour’s research on the relationship between science and theology was stimulated by the conflict hypothesis between Christianity and science of the late 19th century and his belief that theology and science were separate *truth-producing* activities and can be considered in varying forms of relationship to each other. Fr. Laracy specifically focuses his examination on Barbour’s work as it relates to the theology of creation as a possible area for dialogue and integration with the empirical sciences because the natural world is a primary object of study for both.

This is the lens by which Fr. Laracy evaluates Barbour’s approach, since much of what Catholics believe and profess about God and His relationship with man and creation is found within this theology. Notable among the fundamentals of the Catholic doctrine of creation are that God created the material and spiritual order directly from nothing (*ex nihilo*) and with time (*cum tempore*); the metaphysics of God as perfect, self-subsistent being; the dependence of creation on God; and revealed truth and the intelligibility of the universe. Additionally, the relationship between faith and reason in Catholic theology and its reliance on philosophical concepts to give it structure and logical intelligibility are considered in this analysis. Here, Laracy relies heavily on the work of St. Thomas Aquinas on creation.

The book is structured into five chapters and includes a foreword written by Fr. David A Brown, S.J. from the Vatican Observatory. In Chapter 1, “Ian Barbour: Life and Works,” Fr. Laracy presents summaries of key biographical information and Barbour’s early scientific accomplishments. He introduces Barbour’s four-fold typology of conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration. Barbour’s influence on the work of other scholars is discussed and areas of agreement and disagreement are explored, the latter providing further elucidation of Barbour’s position.



Chapter 2, “Barbour’s Fundamental Principles: Theological Suppositions, Epistemology, and Metaphysics,” explores the important philosophical and theological influences that helped to shape Barbour’s approach to theology and science. Most notable were his father, George Brown Barbour, a noted geologist and missionary; the controversial Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who inspired Barbour’s theology of nature and belief in the importance of a comprehensive metaphysics for theology and science; the mathematician and philosopher, Alfred N. Whitehead whose process metaphysics, and philosopher, Charles Hartshorne, whose process theology form the basis for Barbour’s metaphysics; and the influence of post-liberal neo-orthodox Protestant theology at Yale Divinity School where Barbour received his theological education. The chapter also critically assesses Barbour’s epistemology of critical realism and appropriation of Whiteheadian process metaphysics, taking account of the places where he deviates from classic theism and his reformulations of Christian doctrine.

Chapter 3, “Theology and Science: Similarities and Differences According to Barbour,” explores the differences Barbour identified between theology and science in terms of methodology which he divides according to differences in perspective. He assesses scientific materialism, fundamentalism, neoorthodoxy, existentialism, and linguistic analysis as offering contrasting perspectives on science and theology. He considers Neo-Thomism, mainline protestant liberal theology, and process thought as potentially helpful applications that emphasize conceptual and methodological parallels between theology and science. Barbour concludes that despite these parallels the two fields “arise from dissimilar areas of experience which reflect dissimilar aspects of reality” (163). The role of the influence of religious and scientific experience on the interpretation of data is also explored. Barbour notes that differences must be acknowledged by both disciplines but ultimately concludes that “despite the divergence of their interests, it is (according to critical realism) the same natural world to which they look, so their inquiries cannot be totally independent. Ultimately what is needed are modes of interaction between theology and science that respect one another’s integrity” (164).

In Chapter 4, “A Catholic Critique for the Doctrine of Creation,” Fr. Laracy provides a comprehensive evaluation of Barbour’s epistemic, metaphysical, and theological principles relative to other methods utilized to relate theology to science and to the fundamental Catholic theological criteria discussed previously. He analyzes Barbour’s position relative to key issues and beliefs in Systematic Theology as well as issues introduced in Chapter 3 such as the roles of experience, paradigm, and analogy in theology.

In Chapter 5, “Towards Dialogue and Integration,” Fr. Laracy explores where and how Barbour’s approach “can facilitate dialogue and integration between the Catholic doctrine of creation and the natural sciences” (247) and future avenues for investigation into his work. Laracy concludes that Barbour makes significant contributions to the interaction of theology and natural science from a Catholic perspective. He states that “his typologies of interaction and dialogue are helpful guides for the relationship of the Catholic doctrine of creation with physical cosmology and other sciences” (277). This is largely the result of his dedication to dialogue and his “insistence of realism in theology and science, and promotion of a systematic synthesis of the fields through a common metaphysics” (277).

Fr. Laracy points out that the work of Barbour is not likely to affect the development of Catholic doctrine, but it can be helpful in deepening its understanding and promote fruitful dialogue. He also notes that there are challenges for Catholic theological thought in Barbour's approach. Barbour's reliance on process metaphysics is not compatible with traditional Catholic doctrine on several key points: the denial of Biblical teaching on creation *ex nihilo*, theological anthropology, implicit panentheism, denial of the importance of substance and essence, and his denial of the perfection of God. However, Barbour's demonstration of the relevance of ontology, identity, change, causality, necessity, and contingency in theology and science are viewed as points of agreement. Laracy is critical of Barbour's critical realism because it cannot make absolute truth claims and changes in scientific theories cannot be inserted into theology. The need to make compromises impairs certitude, which is a quality of supernatural faith.

This is a well-organized and thoroughly researched work by Fr. Laracy. The thesis is well supported and fully developed. It is suitable for scholars and graduate students in theology, religious studies, philosophy, and the history of science. A foundation in the fundamental principles of Catholic theology and acquaintance with Thomistic thought, as well as philosophy and scientific methodology are useful for the reader.

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