

1-1-1999

Book Reviews

Irv Brendlinger

Lon Fendall

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brendlinger, Irv and Fendall, Lon (1999) "Book Reviews," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 92, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol92/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

BOOK REVIEWS

Wolfgang Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature, Essays on Science and Faith*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, 161 pp. plus index

REVIEWED BY IRV BRENDLINGER

Pannenberg has made a significant contribution to the reconciliation of the long assumed divorce between science and religion, specifically, science and Christian theology. This book is not a quiet evening's easy read. In fact, the book is not to be "read," so much as to be studied. The issues involved are complex and deep and therefore require processing and some rereading in order to be digested. Pannenberg reflects a solid grasp of relevant material in the two related disciplines, science (specifically, physics) and the philosophical underpinnings of theological issues. For the reader who has only a lay understanding of philosophy/theology or physics, the complexity of the concepts makes for slow going. Some concepts are discussed, but not explained in the book, so they need to be explored beyond. However, if one had a mastery of physics and theology/philosophy, one could immediately enter Pannenberg's arguments and mentally interact with him, or even reflect on and debate with his positions. Nevertheless, the issues he brings up are important for thinking people to grapple with, and they are necessary to consider if there is to be a thoughtful and productive dialogue between science and theology.

As the title indicates, the book is a collection of essays, not a unitized development of a thesis. As a result, some of the essays will be particularly interesting and helpful to some readers, and some to others. The title also indicates that these essays move "toward" a theology of nature. This is an important description, not to be confused with a full-blown, self-contained theology of nature, neatly packaged. Pannenberg does not present his theology of nature. Rather, he presents issues that need to be thought through from both the science and the theological perspectives if there is to be a coming together. And it is appropriate that they come together because the early desire to study and understand nature "were at least partially motivated by Christianity." (p. 75)

56 • BOOK REVIEWS

A strength of the book is that it embraces the deeper foundational assumptions of science and theology. It avoids the simplistic bifurcation so often associated with this topic, whereby one *or* the other is seen as relevant or authentic. Pannenberg assumes and states that a key premise to keep in mind is that God as creator makes both the study of origins and the study of God compatible, even essential to each other to some extent. He acknowledges that “Christianity [may have] survived only by temporarily separating the outlook of faith from the rational and scientific investigation and description of the natural world.” He then clarifies that “...such an attitude cannot persist, because it is profoundly unacceptable on theological grounds. If the God of the Bible is the creator of the universe, then it is not possible to understand fully or even appropriately the processes of nature without any reference to that God. If, on the contrary, nature can be appropriately understood without reference to the God of the Bible, then that God cannot be the creator of the universe...” (p. 16) Again, he states, “If theologians want to conceive of God as the creator of the real world, they cannot possibly bypass the scientific description of that world.” (p. 33) At the same time, this work is not an *apologia* for either discipline, or a particular belief.

Pannenberg does not seem to be aware that for many Quakers the supposed conflict between science and religion has long been resolved by seeing God as the Source of all truth. Thus, science is merely the exploration of God’s truth and methods related to the world, the universe, and nature, while theology is the exploration of truth about the Person of God and how God relates to the created order. He states, “the intellectual mind-set of the twentieth century has become accustomed to assuming that no relationship or connection can be validly affirmed between the God of the Christian faith and the understanding of the world in the natural sciences.” (p. 50) While this is obviously true of many twentieth-century persons, the Quaker perspective on the source of truth, and the Quaker commitment to truth has made such a perspective less accurate regarding Friends. Again, Pannenberg reflects that “the time of the blatant opposition to belief in God in the name of scientific progress has passed” being replaced by “a quiet and indifferent coexistence without relationship.” His position is that “this non relational coexistence is not necessary.” (p. 51) This also reflects society in general more than Quakers in particular. One can readily think of Friends today (as well as throughout Quaker history) who, because of their

commitment to all truth as God's truth have made scientific strides without acquiescing theological foundations, and Friends who have given their lives in pursuit of theological truth without becoming antagonistic to scientific advances. The inclusive approach to truth is not only a problem for theologians. Pannenberg indicts "the so-called methodological atheism of modern science" as being "far from pure innocence." (p. 16)

One area of practical interest to readers may be chapter 3, which summarizes some of the key debates between theology and natural science. Pannenberg discusses the church/science split that developed in the sixteenth century from Copernicus's work. He then describes the fallout from Darwin's work and a variety of responses to it. The nature and role of "space" is compared in the thought of Newton and Leibnitz and this is related to whether bodies are moved only "mechanically," or by a transcendent "will." The implications are exciting to explore both theologically and scientifically!

Chapter 2 (and other places throughout the book) explores the positions of noted philosophers (Spinoza, Descartes, Whitehead, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, et. al.) and how they relate to issues such as first causes, miracles vs. natural law, and God's immutability and whether creation must also be unchangeable or not.

While Pannenberg is profoundly versed in the physics issues, reflecting the work of Bondi and von Weizsacker, I was curious about the fact that Stephen Hawking's work on creation was not mentioned. I was also intrigued by Pannenberg's view that Luther held to a literal interpretation of Scripture where natural science gave other explanations. Pannenberg cites a *Table Talk* comment where Luther rejected Copernicus's view as opposed to Scripture (pp. 30, 52). It seems that a better picture of Luther's view of Scripture comes from sources other than *Table Talk*. Paul Althaus gives a more balanced perspective: "The problems of the relationship of the Bible to natural science[...]which have become such significant problems since the Enlightenment, did not yet exist for [Luther]." (Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Fortress Press, 1966, p. 86)

As indicated above, the work of Pannenberg forms a strong and needed invitation to allow theology and science to become teammates rather than opponents. Because this is such an important concern, and because opinion is so divided (from the fundamentalist mentality that sees no value in the pursuit of science to the ultra liberal that sees

58 • BOOK REVIEWS

no value in the validity of theological underpinnings for scientific investigation) it seems to me that another book by Pannenberg could fill a needed gap. In the style of Hans Kung's *Why I Am Still a Christian*, which distills much of his thought in a clear, concise, and brief presentation, accessible to lay readers, a book by Pannenberg that presents the philosophic, theological, and scientific perspectives in constructs graspable by the non-technically educated person would provide a valuable tool. It might also function as an introduction to the more heady investigation and an invitation to the present book. At least, it would open the issue of reducing the science/theology gap to a broad group of people, who just might be willing to entertain such an idea if they understood the issues.

Finally, the other reason scientific inquiry and theological pursuit should be mutually embracing (and Pannenberg should be read) is that a theological sensitivity can "open up and enlarge the intellectual space on which the formation of physical hypotheses depend." (p. 80) If all truth is God's truth, and it is, then to open oneself to truth in any area can increase the capacity to encounter truth at large. God is larger than our comprehension, but one of God's gifts to humankind is an expansive mind, hungry to learn and grow. That hunger should be nurtured. In studying God's universe and thinking God's thoughts after God, we will increasingly learn to think and to encounter truth.

Richard L. Greaves, *Dublin Merchant Quaker: Anthony Sharp and the Community of Friends—1643-1707*. Stanford University Press, 1998.

REVIEWED BY LON FENDALL

It is both encouraging and frustrating to read this study of the early days of the Quakers in Ireland Yearly Meeting. It is encouraging to have a non-Quaker historian of considerable stature devote serious research time to the study of an important figure among early Friends and to have a major university press accept the book for publication. It is frustrating to have that historian fall short of grasping some of the important terms and convictions important to early Friends' polity and theology. It is also frustrating to realize that many readers will fail to grasp much of the significance of Anthony Sharp's life and work without a more adequate explanation of the context of Quaker beliefs and convictions.

Richard Greaves is the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of History at Florida State University. In the research for his book on Protestant conformists in late seventeenth-century Ireland, he considered the significant part of Quakers in this broader range of groups and in turn, became interested in the prominent role of Anthony Sharp. Greaves was quite right that Sharp deserved further study. Whether Greaves was the one to undertake the project is another matter.

Greaves first characterizes Sharp by what he was *not*. He was not egotistical like Fox, charismatic like Naylor, literarily capable like Penn. It doesn't seem fair to describe Fox in one word and a negative one at that. But that gets to the problem. Greaves undoubtedly understands seventeenth-century Irish religious history, but grasps only a little about early Quaker history and beliefs. Greaves goes on to characterize Sharp as the most significant figure among the first generation of Quaker leaders and a good example of the more stable and capable second generation of Quaker leaders like William Penn. Although Sharp did not leave us with the quantity and quality of writings that Penn did, the two were similar in gaining considerable stature and respect in the commerce and public life of their day.

Greaves explores some questions effectively and thoroughly and leaves other major questions unanswered. Greaves was puzzled that a Quaker who refused to take oaths and pay tithes could become so successful in business and so prominent in public life. Sharp not only

60 • BOOK REVIEWS

managed to get admitted to the weavers guild after moving to Dublin in 1669, at age 26, but eventually became a prominent leader in the guild and because of that prominence became an influential figure in the city's government and society. He even was selected as an alderman in 1687, just 18 years after he arrived in Ireland and began his work in the woolen industry.

Since Sharp's rise to prominence occurred in spite of his refusal to take oaths and his dissent from the doctrines of the overwhelmingly powerful Catholic church, Greaves should have given a more adequate explanation of Friends convictions against taking oaths. The basis for this conviction could have easily been found in Fox's writings or in Robert Barclay's more systematic defense of Friends beliefs. Greaves fails to grasp that much of early Friends doctrine was a product of radical obedience to New Testament teachings. Christ taught his followers to make their statements without separating those that were true by reinforcing them with oaths. In the Sermon on the Mount Christ said, "Simply let your 'yes' be 'yes,' and your 'no,' 'no'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." (Matt. 5:37 NIV) Friends obeyed these passages out of a determined obedience to Christ, not some sort of stubborn, quaint nonconformity. Greaves makes the mistake of interpreting early Quakerism as though it was no different from what it became a century later, i.e., a movement not grounded in the teachings of Jesus but the attempt to follow some ill-defined idea of the inner light.

The reader of Greaves's biography is left in confusion by his use of terms for the various levels of Friends worship and business groups. Quaker readers would expect the use of the terms that were used in most places from the very early days—preparative meeting, monthly meeting, quarterly meeting, and yearly meeting. Many non-Quaker readers would have encountered these terms before and would also expect them to be used consistently in this work. But for those unfamiliar with the terms, their first use in the book would have warranted a footnote of explanation of their origin and meaning. Instead Greaves mixes these terms with those that may or may not have been in current use in Ireland at the time—local, provincial, and national meeting. If Greaves found such terms in use in the documents of the time, readers need an explanation of when these were replaced by the terms still in use in Ireland Yearly Meeting—monthly, quarterly, and yearly meeting. Other terms unique to Quakers are not used where

one would expect—traveling minute (in place of “certificate”) and Quaker traveling in the ministry (instead of “Public Friend”).

Greaves’s work often suffers from both the abundance and the dearth of the material in the archives. When there was an abundance of material, Greaves included too many of its details in his narrative, with too little interpretation and context. When there was an absence of documentation he resorted to speculation.

Greaves’s work is both helpful and not helpful in glimpsing some of the sources of early Quaker persecution that are no longer major issues. In addition to persecution for refusing to take oaths and pay tithes Quaker business operators were regularly harassed for their refusal to observe various holy days, especially Christmas. Quaker shop owners kept their places of business open on Christmas Day out of discomfort with the excesses of Christmas observance at the time and suffered regular vandalism from crowds of thugs, who probably were drunk and looking for excitement. Greaves fails to note that early Friends were fully committed to the Christ whose birthday was being remembered at Christmas, but wanted to have nothing to do with religious holidays that retained so little reverence toward Christ. Friends today might be inclined at times to follow the lead of Irish Friends, bearing witness against the excessive materialism of Christmas observance.

Those interested in the early days of Ireland Yearly Meeting will want to read this book. Those expecting the book to connect well with Quaker historiography in general should pass it by.