

Bolger, Robert, *Kneeling at the Altar of Science*, Pickwick Publications, Oregon, 2012; pp. 160. ISBN 13: 978-1-61097-316-8

These last decades have seen many publications dealing with science and religion. The overall debate seems to have settled on the idea that dialogue between these disciplines is not only possible but of the utmost importance. Bolger's book, therefore, comes as a surprise because, as he indicates in its subtitle, *The Mistaken Path of Contemporary Religious Scientism*, he seems to take issue with this consensus. He is convinced that a subtle form of scientism is infecting large areas of theological discourse, with the result that the dialogue between these two disciplines is often seriously misguided. The ailment is most evident when theologians attempt to use science to expound, assess, and clarify certain religious concepts. They adopt a form of religious scientism, and inadvertently end up undermining their own discipline. They make key religious words and expressions mean what these words and expressions were never intended to mean, and they thereby distort what religious believers do with words.

Consider, for instance, the use of models. There is nothing inherently wrong when theologians use models, analogies, or metaphors to grasp and express some aspects of religion. Serious problems however emerge whenever they uncritically adopt what scientists mean by «model» and start thinking of God just as scientists think of unobservable entities. Their basic idea here is that, if scientists can use their methods to reach beyond the observable and make claims about the existence of, say, electrons, so can theologians as regard God. Prominent thinkers in this area, like Ian Barbour, have been very happy with this parallelism. Bolger rightly points out however that this analogy fails terribly because, since electrons, and all other unobservable entities, are necessary postulated within space and time, this kind of bridge between the two disciplines reduces God to a spatiotemporal entity, thereby distorting religious thinking beyond all recognition.

Retrieving the precious insights of L. Wittgenstein and D. Z. Phillips, Bolger shows that religious language does not derive its meaning primarily by referring to entities in a mind-independent world. It does not derive meaning by hooking up each word to some corresponding entity. It derives it rather from the commitments shown in the life of the believer.

This basic fact about meaning exposes serious mistakes in the work of prominent contributors to the science-religion debates. Bolger shows for instance that William Dembski's intricately argued defence of intelligent design fails, because, if intelligent design is a scientific hypothesis detached from the religious context, it can arrive at nothing better than a god-of-the-gaps; and such a god is not what religious people believe in. He shows also how Philip Clayton's attempts to prove that divine action is possible within the domain of the laws of nature cannot be persuasive, because, appealing to ontological emergence, as he does, makes sense only for someone who already believes in God. Bolger uncovers serious problems also with Arthur Peacocke's idea of panentheism. If we follow Peacocke and say that God's action in the world is co-extensive with the causal exchanges studied by science, then we would reduce God to nature. Divine action as such would then become redundant.

In his final chapter, Bolger elaborates his position further and explains how the way language works in religion does not, and should not, correspond to the way it works in science. This position may seem to downgrade the importance of existential claims within religious discourse. He explains however that «the appearance that one is denying the *real* existence of God when one looks to the meaning of the use of religious concepts may be an unfortunate by-product of thinking that religious

concepts *must* function like their empirical counterparts» (p. 138). For some readers, Bolger's position may appear weak here, because, as historians have shown, scientific innovation can be radical enough to change various human practices. There are indeed innumerable different forms of life, but we need to recall that each form of life is related to its neighbours, and that what happens in one affects the others. The study of how science has affected religion in the course of history is therefore indispensable.

Having said that, I think Bolger has made an extremely useful contribution. Michael Buckley had argued in *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Yale 1990) that early modern thinkers like Mersenne, Descartes, and Newton, in their attempts to place theism on safe scientific foundations, inadvertently undermined religion and gave rise to atheism. Bolger shows how the same thing is happening today as well-intentioned theologians are again being tempted to worship at the altar of science. The dialogue between science and religion is indeed crucial, but not because theologians should convert and become scientists. It is crucial because it can help us determine more clearly the identity of these two disciplines by uncovering the subtle but very important *differences* between them. What we do with language in general is much richer than what we do with it in science.

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