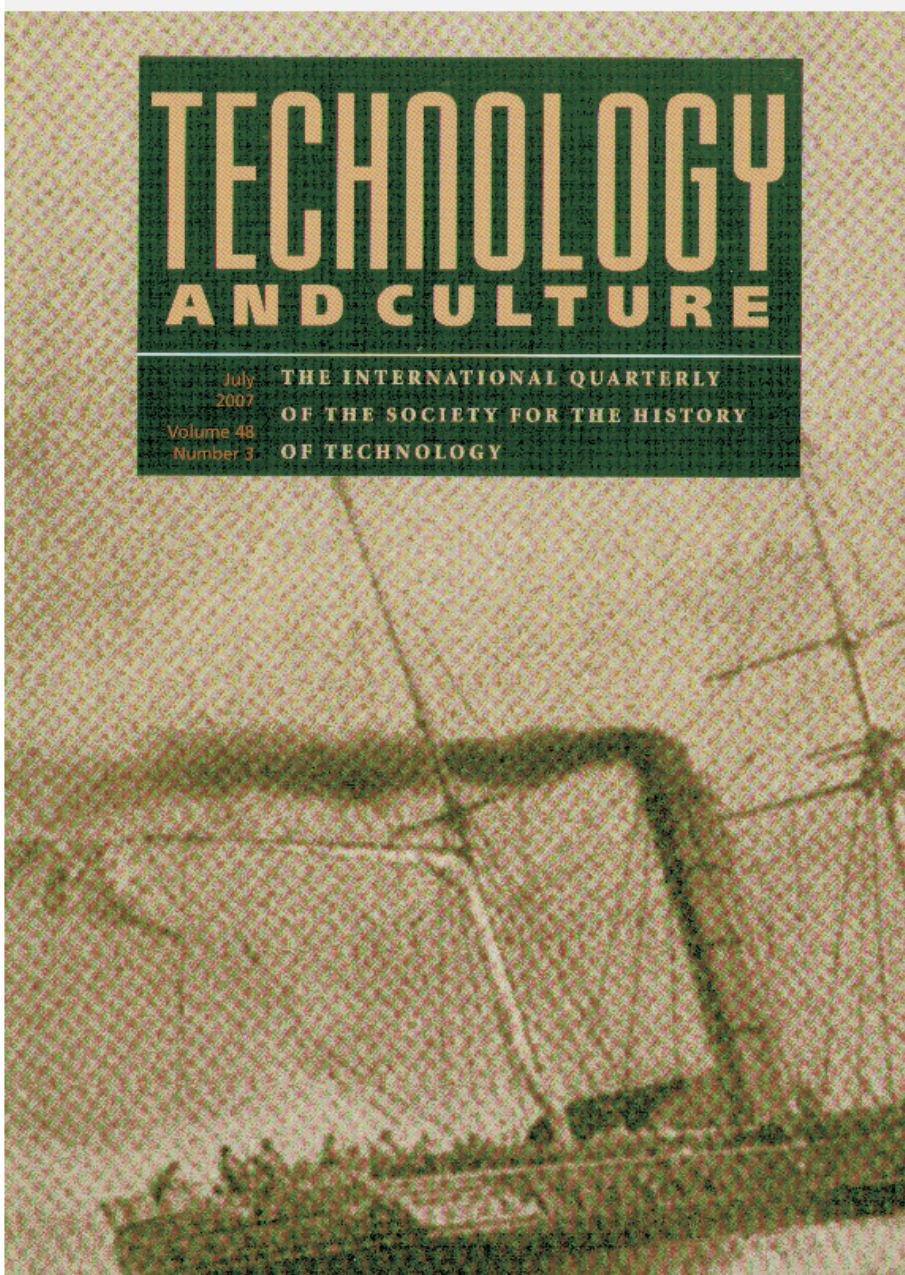


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The Religious Foundations of Francis Bacon's Thought.

By Stephen A. McKnight. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006.
Pp. 193. \$37.50.

In this well-structured monograph, Stephen A. McKnight seeks to correct the view that Francis Bacon's use of religious motifs and tropes is "manipulative," "cynical," and "disingenuous," a view McKnight considers to be prevalent (pp. 1, 2, 11). To accomplish his goal, he subjects several of Bacon's works to a close reading. He concludes that the "pervasiveness of religious

motifs, scriptural references, and biblical doctrines" in Bacon's writings "establish[es] the central role religion plays in Bacon's thought" (p. 151). McKnight holds that Bacon's religiosity is not disingenuous, but sincere.

McKnight begins with the *New Atlantis*. He finds here abundant biblical references, including references to Adam, Jonah, Joab, and Bartholomew, to Solomon's Temple, the Ark, and the Pillar of Cloud, and to themes of piety, charity, salvation, and deliverance. McKnight then devotes chapter 2 to the engraved title page, proemium, dedication, preface, and plan for Bacon's *Great Instauration*. In this chapter he cites and adopts Charles Whitney's proposal in *Francis Bacon and Modernity* (1986) that "instauration" is to be understood with reference to the instauration (as the Vulgate calls it) of Solomon's Temple. In the *New Organon*, treated in chapter 3, McKnight finds recurring religious themes of vocation, pride, idolatry, divine illumination, despair, hope, apocalypse, providence, and nature as God's creation. A few of Bacon's earlier works are each briefly considered in chapter 4. A short concluding chapter highlights four of the themes that have recurred frequently in the survey. On his first task, McKnight succeeds. Religious motifs and images do pervade Bacon's writings, and their pervasiveness and consistency indeed suggest a sincerely held religious belief.

Using this evidence, McKnight sets himself another and larger task—to challenge the centuries-old perception of Bacon as a champion of "empiricism, rationality, and secularization" (p. 1) and to claim that Bacon was not advocating "materialism, secularism, and ambition," but rather the "apocalyptic installation of the Christian Kingdom of God . . . characterized by the three Christian virtues—faith, hope, and charity" (p. 153). On this task, McKnight is much less persuasive, for several reasons.

First, he draws overly precise doctrines from ordinary, formulaic, metaphorical, or fictional passages. In the dedication to the *New Organon*, Bacon lauds the king's erudition by writing, "I have often thought that . . . your Majesty were the best instance to make a man of Plato's opinion, that all knowledge is but remembrance" (quoted on p. 136). From this clever compliment, McKnight concludes that Bacon's epistemology is based on Plato's philosophy of innate ideas. Where Bacon says his method will have historic benefit, McKnight concludes that Bacon thinks he was chosen by God for "providential intervention and apocalyptic deliverance" (p. 47). From Bacon's hope that man can return to a prelapsarian control over the created world, McKnight concludes that Original Sin is the core of Bacon's view of human nature. These surprising claims and many others need much more evidence than McKnight marshals.

A second shortcoming is the book's heavy reliance on Bacon's more symbolic works and passages. The *New Atlantis* was a fictional work, never finished, and published only posthumously. Dedications by a lord chancellor to an English king whose religious authority is still insecure are neces-

sarily religious and formulaic. Bacon's theology cannot be confidently determined from writings such as these without regard, for example, to his carefully edited and thrice-published *Essays*, a work McKnight overlooks.

Third, many of the book's arguments have the following structure. A symbolic or metaphorical passage in Bacon is found to contain extensive treatment of some religious theme—say, charity. A presumption that this theme is in contrast to another—say, pride or materialistic ambition—is then silently imported. The conclusion is drawn that Bacon was a critic, and not, as conventionally understood, an advocate of the second theme. But Bacon's advocacy is often explicitly and unambiguously stated elsewhere in the corpus and is not so easily dismissed. To understand Bacon's faith we need to determine how he reconciled doctrines that to us may seem contradictory but did not to him.

Finally, students of Bacon have studied his religious views since the Enlightenment. Although McKnight dismisses many past portrayals, he does little to directly confront the evidence and arguments for them.

In documenting religious motifs in several of Bacon's writings, this book is a valuable success. In characterizing Bacon's religious beliefs and how they influenced the rest of his thought, it is much less convincing.

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Dr. McCaskey's recently completed Stanford University dissertation traces the evolution of the concept of induction from antiquity through Scholasticism and the Renaissance to Bacon and seventeenth-century natural philosophers.

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