

A Book Review on Science and Religion

Colleagues,

For this week's ThTh post Dr. Peter Keyel offers a Science-and-Religion book review. Newly elected to the Crossings board, Peter is a layman who works in immunology and was raised in the ELCA. Just a few weeks ago he was asked to submit an essay on this theme for an ELCA publication. He's showed me what he wrote. If his prose makes the cut, Crossings will get some publicity—possibly for the first time—in the church-wide regions of the ELCA. Even better, of course, is that ELCA readers will get some good stuff. Peter lives and works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Marilynne Robinson

ABSENCE OF MIND: THE DISPELLING OF INWARDNESS FROM THE MODERN MYTH OF THE SELF.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. hardcover. xviii-158 pages,

\$24 [\$16.32 @www.amazon.com \$17.28 @www.bn.com]

The interplay between science, philosophy and religion has fascinated people since the birth of these fields. Although today this often plays out as proving the existence of God, it has not always been observed as such. In 1905, Dwight H. Terry formed a foundation with a specific perspective on science, philosophy and religion:

"The object of this foundation is not the promotion of scientific investigation and discovery, but rather the assimilation and interpretation of that which has been or shall be hereafter discovered, and its application to human welfare, especially by the building of the truths of science and philosophy into the structure of a broadened and purified religion. The founder believes that such a religion will greatly stimulate intelligent effort for the improvement of human conditions and the advancement of the race in strength and excellence of character."To this end it is desired that a series of lectures be given by men eminent in their respective departments, on ethics, the history of civilization and religion, biblical research, all sciences and branches of knowledge which have an important bearing on the subject, all the great laws of nature, especially of evolution ... also such interpretations of literature and sociology as are in accord with the spirit of this foundation, to the end that the Christian spirit may be nurtured in the fullest light of the world's knowledge and that mankind may be helped to attain its highest possible welfare and happiness upon this earth."

This foundation has sponsored since 1923 an annual series of four lectures usually given by the same person to fulfill this mandate. The 2009 Terry lectures were given by writer Marilynne Robinson, best known for her works GILEAD (awarded the 2005 Pulitzer Prize) and HOUSEKEEPING. Her latest book, ABSENCE OF MIND, is written from these Terry lectures. True to the mandate of the lectures, ABSENCE OF MIND attempts to reconcile science with religion, specifically through consideration of how the concept of "mind" has not been properly treated by modern and post-modern philosophers of science, starting from Auguste Comte up through Sigmund Freud and Richard Dawkins.

Each lecture forms a chapter of the book, and is a complete

essay in and of itself. Along with the introduction, the first chapter "On Human Nature" lays the groundwork for Robinson's story. This is the best chapter of the entire book because it systematically and critically examines modern descriptions of the mind that are written from what she calls "a posture of science." It especially focuses critical thought on the assumptions underpinning these arguments. Using examples from Richard Dawkins, Bertrand Russell and others, she shows how they rely on a common set of unproven assumptions, and fail their own proposed tests to permit only "rational" thought.

Most importantly she shows that this literature rests on the myth of a threshold, before which we were ignorant savages, and afterwards enlightened beings. Once past this threshold, whether it be Darwin's, Freud's, or anyone else's version, views that previously were assumptions are now taken as solid fact that are not permitted to be examined rigorously. This view further posits that since all views prior to this threshold were borne of ignorance, they are safely discarded and forgotten. This leads to startling "novel" discoveries that are further used to discredit the older viewpoint.

Robinson's example of this is how older viewpoints understood the existence of Babylonian and Assyrian narratives of the Flood as proving the account in Genesis, while the modern viewpoint is that the Babylonian and Assyrian accounts are startling discoveries that threaten the authenticity of Genesis. She also examines how many of these authors, including Russell, use the introspective abilities of their minds to tackle problems, but fail to consider introspective aspects to religion. Because of all these problems, the beliefs of the "modern, scientific thought" are termed "parascientific" throughout the remainder of the book.

The second chapter deals specifically with the issue of

altruism, which for Robinson is one of the primary areas in which parascientific arguments fall well short of the mark. Although she does consider a number of arguments in this chapter, it falls short on at least two accounts. She dismisses game theory with a single sentence, which fails to do justice to this branch of mathematics. Also, she does not consider any variant of social exchange theory, which would be one powerful counter-argument to this chapter.

The third chapter abruptly changes to focus on Sigmund Freud. While this book generally assumes a scholarly audience, this chapter marks the most abrupt change that may mystify the average reader. Robinson presumes the reader is already familiar with Freud's view that religion is an expression of underlying sexual or "psychosexual" problems, and so launches her apology without firmly laying that groundwork. Here Robinson attempts to rescue religion from Freud's assessment by reducing his views of self, mind and religion to artifacts of his social and cultural context. She presents evidence that his writings served as a counter-narrative against the dominant anti-Semitism and nationalism in his home of Vienna and elsewhere. In place of that narrative, Freud offered one free of the cultural and religious traditions underpinning that dominant world-view and instead grounded his narrative in the same assumptions used by the parascience writers earlier discussed.

The final chapter outlines Robinson's view of the mind, or at least the kinds of questions we should be asking about the mind and experience, and the possibilities for the advancement of science, religion and culture if her views are shared. While it is fairly logically consistent, her flawed chemistry example will provide a ready straw-man for anyone wishing to disagree with her.

However, for a Christian audience, straw-men are the least of

the worries. Although Martin Luther receives mention on p.15, and Lutheranism is the only Christian denomination named in the book, there is nothing Christian, let alone Lutheran, in the entire book. At its best, ABSENCE OF MIND exposes irrational and unproven assumptions underlying parascientific and anti-religious arguments, and does this from within a scientific point of view. However, what is erected in its place is a vague mysticism of the mind and the idea that if we give religion its due and ask the correct questions, science and religion will complement each other and bring us to a higher level of joy, insight and prosperity.

Nowhere is Christ's death and resurrection mentioned, likely because it is not necessary for, and perhaps contrary to, her story. Christ is not needed because there is no consideration of sin, which would also challenge her thesis (and that of the Terry lectures in general) that the "truths of science and philosophy" can be built "into the structure of a broadened and purified religion." Implicit is an assumption that sin and other problems can be overcome by finding and applying the correct combination of science, philosophy and religion. However, if our sin is a problem that only God can solve, then all of our efforts in science, philosophy and even religion will fail to solve that problem, and even serve to make that problem worse.

While Robinson does affirm mystical experience of God (or more strictly, the mind), that mystical experience is robbed of greater meaning by removing it from the context of humankind's standing under judgment before God. It never engages the question of humankind before the divine judge, even though Freud, along with others, have considered that question in various forms. In this light, one powerful question that she fails to ask is whether the desire to completely eliminate religion and replace it with a scientific/parascientific paradigm is not itself a result of God's wrath.

Thus, for a Christian audience, this book can serve as only part of the story. Although Robinson relies on a gospel of progress instead of the Christian Gospel, ABSENCE OF MIND may be useful in pointing out that nonbelievers need something more than the parascientific viewpoint, or at least that they see some of the flaws inherent in that viewpoint. It still remains with the reader both to articulate and trust that this something more is God's forgiveness borne out of Jesus' death and resurrection, as received by faith, not reason.

Peter Keyel

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