

# Book Reviews

orderliness of creation that is somewhat at odds with the deflating final chapter. Here, new evidence is presented well, and its ultimate implications are left for the reader to ponder.

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## PHILOSOPHY & THEOLOGY

**STATE OF AFFAIRS: The Science-Theology Controversy** by Richard J. Coleman. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014. xii + 272 pages. Paperback; \$32.00. ISBN: 9781625647016.

If the title of Richard Coleman's first book at this intersection, *Competing Truths: Theology and Science as Sibling Rivals* (Bloomsbury, 2001), highlighted the contrasts but worked toward synthesis, the main title of the present book, almost fifteen years later, suggests a *status quaestionis*, but actually urges that whatever synthesis might be previously either promoted or achieved is premature given the disparate methodologies. Perhaps this is in part because in the intervening period, Coleman's *Eden's Garden: Rethinking Sin and Evil in an Era of Scientific Promise* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) scrutinized the sciences from a theological vantage point and observed that scientific inquiry, no less than any other human venture, is not less susceptible to overreaching in its pursuit of inquiry and knowledge, and hence he has become much more sanguine and realistic about the scientific enterprise. *State of Affairs* thus suggests that while the value of science should not be underestimated, we ought not to overlook the differences between it and the theological disciplines.

Now Coleman is advocating neither the classical "conflict" thesis nor the two-truths or independence model of more recent provenance. Instead, he engages more specifically and most extensively with what he calls the movement of "new rapprochement" (NR) between theology and science represented in the last generation by the contributions of Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, and John Polkinghorne, among others. Coleman's argument is that NR, while helpful in various respects, also has been too accommodating to science, its constraints and empirical methods, and thereby has both minimized theology's distinctiveness and subjected its work to scientific frameworks and presuppositions. Along this latter route, theology subordinates its task of clarifying the deposit of revelation to that of "keeping up with the sciences" (my colloquialism), so to speak, and thereby forgets its prophetic stance of readiness to confront critically the shortcomings inherent in all human undertakings.

Note that Coleman writes not as a scientist for scientists but as a theologian for his peers. From my own

vantage point as a theologian looking to engage the sciences, I am grateful for this timely reminder about the differences between both endeavors. Yet insofar as the modern sciences are driven in principle by the quest for ever-expanding knowledge, they have threatened, if not dethroned, theology from her status during the medieval period as "queen of the sciences." Hence, if science can overreach, part of the question is whether theology has its own realm and, if such, is anything less than all-there-is. It should not be surprising that if the extent of science's reach is contested even among those working in that arena, the scope of theology—for example, whether it concerns the existential depth of the human experience or the eschatological horizon of the cosmos or the transcendent dimensions of the world, or any and everything at all!—might itself not be amenable to clear definition. The extent to which theologians disagree about these matters will incline them to engage with Coleman's thesis divergently.

In the end, what Coleman wants, charitably put, is for theologians to take a more appropriately disputational, even prophetic approach to the sciences, with such contesting and disrupting capacities understood as theology's gift to scientific inquiry. Yet as the scientific method is itself designed to continually question what we know, theologians do not have a corner on the disputational market. This is not to say that theologians ought not to pose hard questions to science, or even that theology might not make a difference in the scientific domain. It is to say that the stance recommended by Coleman might be less confrontational than intimate. Here the carefully developed proposals over the last two decades plus those of Robert John Russell—to whom Coleman refers in passing on a few occasions but does not engage in any depth—deserve to be carefully studied.

Coleman's constructive way forward is complicated on two fronts: first, by the long history of fundamentalist, creationist, and intelligent design voices that understand themselves as disputational interventions vis-à-vis the sciences; and second, by the fact that in the twenty-first century, Christian theology's voice in the religion-science interface is one among other religious traditions engaging and even challenging the sciences. So the question is how to promote a disputational stance that is constructive for the wider conversation (as opposed to being merely reactive as on the former trajectory) and that is distinctive in a pluralistic world (as opposed to being perceived as merely attempting to get a leg up in a crowded field). When understood diachronically and historically in light of the last millennium of Christian theology's love-hate relationship with the sciences, the question can be expanded: what kind of theology or theological method can be an appropriate "queen"—on the one hand, being bold and prophetic while on the

other hand, also humble in recognizing its self-limitations (limitations that are pertinent to all human efforts, which Coleman grants: p. 245) vis-à-vis other bodies of knowledge?

My own proposal (developed elsewhere) has been that such a theological approach should be distinctively pneumatological, following out of the Day of Pentecost metaphor that understands the many tongues inspired by the Spirit as also heralding the witnesses of the many faiths and the many scientific disciplines. This allows both the possibility of honest engagement with others from the standpoint of difference and also the capacity to receive from them in turn. If this is correct, then the way forward involves an enrichment of NR, not its curtailment, and this itself might open up to a healthier, even if no less controversial, “state of affairs” for the next generation of theology’s engagement with the sciences.

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### TECHNOLOGY

**THE WAR ON LEARNING: Gaining Ground in the Digital University** by Elizabeth Losh. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014. 240 pages, notes. Hardcover; \$32.95. ISBN: 9780262027380.

The battle lines are being drawn with faculty and students on opposing sides. Students are armed with weapons of mass distraction—cell phones, social networks, and all sorts of digital media at their fingertips. Faculty members are ready to fight back with PowerPoint slides, online quizzes, and plagiarism detection software. But are these truly the forces in opposition in higher education today? That is the central question within Elizabeth Losh’s *The War on Learning: Gaining Ground in the Digital University*.

One does not need to look far to find examples of how educational technologies are being deployed throughout higher education. From classroom response systems (“clickers”) to flipping the classroom (i.e., moving the lecture portion to video viewed outside of class time), from social media back-channels in large lecture courses to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), there is a wide array of technologies being implemented in universities today. Some faculty members decry these as mere novelties, or even as impositions signaling the end of academia as we know it; others embrace these types of innovation as the salvation of higher education in a world where the stuffy stodginess of the Academy is becoming less relevant to the needs and interests of the students it is purported to serve.

The truth is perhaps—as it so often lands—between these poles. And while arguments about the value and impact of technology integration can be made across the spectrum, for those striving to teach Christianly in higher education, or even articulate a distinctively Christian approach to tertiary education, we need to recognize the competing worldviews of both poles. Thus, we must explore the contrasts of the philosophical and the pragmatic, the historical and the contemporary in university culture. And, most of all, we must wade into the murky middle ground where overlapping and contrasting interests are most likely to come into conflict.

This messy intersection of the historic Academy and the digitally infused twenty-first-century life is home territory for Losh, who serves as director of the Culture, Art, and Technology Program at Sixth College at the University of California, San Diego. This innovative program sits at the intersection of historic liberal arts academia and contemporary media and technology. The Culture, Arts, and Technology Program is a required interdisciplinary course sequence for first-year students at Sixth College; it might best be described as a “digital humanities” program, aimed at developing research, writing, and communication skills in the context of twenty-first-century digitally enhanced culture. Among her research interests, Losh lists media theory, digital rhetoric, democracy and media culture, and critical theory. In *The War on Learning*, she draws these interest areas together in an examination of contemporary academic culture in higher education.

Her opening chapters are expository, and concern the nature of today’s university students and how their attitudes and practices stand in contrast with the mindsets of college faculty and administrators. Faculty may eye students as “cheaters” or “hackers”; this attitude prompts, at best, a defensive posture on the part of instructors and, at worst, a mindset of “get them before they get us.” As Losh puts it, “This book explores the assumption that digital media deeply divide students and teachers and that a once covert war between ‘us’ and ‘them’ has turned into an open battle between ‘our’ technologies and ‘their’ technologies” (p. 25). And it certainly seems that these two groups might be “at battle” in a high-tech arms race in the classroom, but Losh calls into question what battle is truly being fought. She argues that “each side is not really fighting the other ... both appear to be conducting an incredibly destructive war on learning itself by emphasizing competition and conflict rather than cooperation” (p. 26).

It is through this lens that Losh goes on to examine a variety of technological interventions in higher education, offering illustrations of real-life tales of technology integration gone wrong. She uses these vignettes of failure to provide commentary on the context of the