the "Yale School" of narrative theology, the book considers in great detail the ways in which Augustine, Calvin, and Barth read the "plain sense" of Scripture of the first three chapters of Genesis.

The book opens with a careful discussion of what we mean when we invoke "the plain sense" of Scripture for our particular purposes. It becomes quickly apparent to the reader that most of us have not considered this action thoughtfully enough, since many key issues and themes, problems and possibilities present themselves under her exegetical and philosophical scrutiny. The bulk of the book is then devoted to careful readings of Augustine's De Genesis ad litteram, Book 12, Calvin's Commentary on the First Book of Moses, and Barth's Church Dogmatics, Vol. 3.1. Key issues she considers for each author include: (1) how they understood the task of reading the verbal sense of specific verses and passages within Genesis; (2) the degree to which each writer investigates the narrative structure employed, the intent, and the historical referents of the "original author(s);" (3) intrabiblical "prooftexting" in which each writer engages as a reader removed by time and space from the original writer(s); and (4) how the interpreter's assumptions about the "sacredness" of the text and its meaning influence their interpretation of the "plain sense." Clearly these issues not only relate to Genesis 1-3 but also to our individual doctrine of Scripture. Our perspective on the "plain sense" of Scripture and the meanings we attach to that phrase dramatically influence exegesis, hermeneutics, theology—and might we say—our understandings of the relationship between science and Scripture.

While the intent of the author was to explore the doctrine of Scripture, using these three theologians and their musings about Genesis 1-3 as the test case, she has inadvertently made a major contribution to contemporary evangelical debate about the meaning of Genesis 1-3. Readers can find themselves as more or less represented by the viewpoints of Augustine, Calvin, or Barth regarding the meanings of the primordial narrative of Genesis. The exegetical and hermeneutical issues that must be understood and explored to arrive at a "plain sense" of Scripture and the inevitable assumptions that underlay their "proper" use should lead all of us to consider anew those things that unite us rather than highlighting and majoring on those things that divide us. I cannot recommend this book too highly despite its steep price.

Reviewed by Dennis W. Cheek, Director of Information Services & Research, RI Department of Education and Adjunct Associate Professor of Education, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI 02881-0806.


This book can easily serve as a course textbook. The writing is clear and accessible to those without specialized backgrounds. Topics are presented in a fair and balanced manner. Chapters include frequent displays of summary material and reading lists for further study. There is also a nine-page bibliography. This book is also a very readable summary that could be attractive to PSCF readers. I highly recommended it.

Reviewed by David T. Barnard, Professor of Computer Science and President, University of Regina, Regina, SK S4S 0A2.


Polkinghorne, former president of Queens' College, Cambridge University, is a Fellow of the Royal Society. Sixteen years ago, he resigned from his chair in Mathematical Physics at Cambridge to study for the Anglican priesthood. Since then, he has published ten books relating science to religion, beginning with the book, The Way the World Is.

The first four chapters of this book are from the Terry Lectures delivered at Yale University in October 1996. In the first chapter, Polkinghorne uses his physics background to argue that the correspondence of a mathematical model with the universe is unusual if the universe is simply a fortunate by-product of atheistic evolution. The rational beauty of the cosmos is a reflection of God who makes human beings in his image to understand his creation.
Polkinghorne says that the Anthropic Principle, the fine-tuning of physical laws, again calls for recognizing the theistic conclusion as an intellectually satisfying explanation of the universe. Polkinghorne’s natural theology is different from that of Anselm and Aquinas, in that it is not based on proof but on insight. It also differs from William Paley’s view in not emphasizing one particular occurrence, but on the general characteristics of the physical world. It is no longer a natural theology, but a theology of nature. Theology provides assistance for our understanding of the universe.

Polkinghorne then explains that God-given human freedom has a necessary cost. He charts a middle course between determinism and relativism. He thinks that our moral intuitions, aesthetic pleasures, and religious inclinations point to the mind of God. Polkinghorne concludes that hope makes life complete by denying the finality of death.

The second chapter explores the similarity between science and religion in their ways of finding truth. He uses the examples of quantum theory and Christology to show that both theories went through periods of revision, confusion, synthesis, further wrestling of problems, and extension. He concludes that both science and theology have a quest for truth as its central task.

The third chapter discusses how God acts in the physical world. Polkinghorne takes the view of a top-down causality (input of information), which is different from the bottom-up view of Process theology. However, he takes the view that God has both temporal and eternal poles and is thus involved in time, just as we are. God’s omniscience is self-limited to allow for an open and evolving world. God is not the Composer of the whole cosmic score, but the Great Improviser of unsurpassed ingenuity.

In the fourth chapter, Polkinghorne emphasizes the importance of a continuing dialogue between science, especially biology, and religion. However, he thinks the conversation is most lacking in contributions from systematic theologians. In contrast to the “bottom-up thinking” of Barbour, Peacocke, and Pollock, other theologians appear to take the top-down approach. Polkinghorne thinks Big Bang cosmology, the dawn of human consciousness, the meaning of eschatology, and the moral problems posed by the growth of science are areas for intensive discussion. He also thinks both science and theology are being marginalized by the postmodern world; and he involves himself as a missionary for science, as well as for religion.

In the post-Terry Lecture chapter, Polkinghorne explains his critical realism view of science and religion. In both areas, knowledge should be a true description of reality and should be pursued critically and creatively. The variety of scientific methods may help authenticate the variety of authentic spiritual experiences. By faith, scientists and theologians trust that truth can be found through understanding and experience.

In the last mathematical postscript, Polkinghorne further explores mathematic realism. He shows that mathematics is more than logic and human construction. He believes that there is a realm of mental experience containing the truths of mathematics. Mathematics provides a powerful encouragement to refute physical reductionism and to support the dual nature of reality.

This treatise contains Polkinghorne’s ultimate thinking about the relationship between science and religion. He explains in great detail why it is possible to believe in God in an age of science. He shows that this is not only possible, but also preferable. He tries to make the dialogue between science and religion a two-way street, but I think his theology is influenced too much by quantum theory.

Darwinism is not an inescapable consequence of the theory of evolution; “Openness of God” theology is also not a necessary conclusion of the quantum theory. Some readers may see Polkinghorne’s concept of God as deviating too much from classical theology. Otherwise, this is a well-written and well-argued book from the hand of a preeminent scientist-theologian.

Reviewed by T. Timothy Chen, University of Maryland Medical School, Baltimore, MD 21201.


This collection of essays by the former president of Cornell University was published in 1896 and hailed as brilliant by many academics and policy makers. Its central argument was that religious beliefs and sentiments should not control features of institutions or research programs that are striving to be scientific. The book was produced in an era when universities still prescribed daily or weekly chapel attendance for all students, restricted or allowed no...