Reviews

Christopher L. Fisher. *Human Significance in Theology and the Natural Sciences: An Ecumenical Perspective with Reference to Pannenberg, Rahner, and Zizioulas*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010 (351pp) [ISBN 13: 978-1-60608-053-5]

Christopher Fisher, with great attention to detail and creative analysis, explores the concomitant voice he hears coming from theological and natural scientific discourse, which respectively reveal the high view of human cosmic significance. That is, Fisher proposes that human beings are, in fact, 'cosmically significant in some clear and precise ways that are visible to both theology and the natural sciences' (2). Such a premise garnered my attention, and through balanced consideration of theological and scientific discourse Fisher was able to make it a worthwhile and interesting read.

The first part of the book has Fisher engaging three important theologians, as indicated in the title above. His selection of these theologians who offer an ecumenical perspective for Fisher's problem is somewhat curious. However, one would be hard pressed to find a more engaged group of theologians found at the intersection of theology and science—'each wrestles with the subject of human nature from a Trinitarian and incarnational perspective, and each is sensitive to related issues in contemporary thought and in the natural sciences' (17).

His overarching conclusion from his investigation of these three great minds, is that one may discover in the theocentricity of the universe an anthropocentricity that is not only bolstered but wholly goaded by the incarnation (85). Humanity is proven to be valued, rather centrally vital to the work of God's good creation and recreation, as evidenced in the unfolding of reality that gives rise to the communion between God and humanity—a reality who is the Christ (91). Moreover, in this theological discussion, Fisher is able to demonstrate just how adept Zizioulas, Rahner, and Pannenberg are at engaging critical developments in the natural sciences while staying true to the peculiarities of theological grammar and method culminating in the noted conclusions.

All in all, Fisher is able to work through each theologian with a level of mastery that is refreshing. That is, he is able to cover all of the theological bases with each participant while clearly articulating the

central positions, assessing certain theological and scientific implications, and admitting to the subsequent limitations inherent in the theological vision of each and the dialogue attained through interdisciplinary comparisons. Really, it is in this first section that Fisher's work is most engaging and his scholarly skill clearly established.

However, Fisher's treatment of the theologians is so good that when one gets to his second section, on the natural sciences, the flow of the book slows (and my interest waned). This is not to say that this section is at all weak or academically trivial. In fact, the second section of the book is as critically engaged as the first. The conclusions, however, are not as provocative or interesting. The most interesting part of this second section may be in its introduction, chapter 4. Fisher begins this section with cautionary conclusions regarding the limits of intersecting dialogue between science and theology. Fisher recognizes that prevailing attitudes and foundations for epistemic enquiry differ between these two sciences, yet he is critically hopeful that the two traditions may be able to concede on certain things so as to garner a ground fertile for open and advancing discourse. Yet, his hopeful position depends upon the natural scientist to accept the majority weight of concessionary actions.

Such a call for concessions, though interesting, is coupled with a seemingly foundationalist imperative that runs throughout the book, 'there should be some measure of coherence between the theological and scientific views' (19). The question that was not fully pursued, however, is this: 'Why should there be such coherence?' I think that without offering a more clear response to this question, the discussion of coherence may actually confuse the ground for good interdisciplinary dialogue and misrepresent what Pannenberg, Rahner, and Zizioulas may be striving towards—not a concession by natural and social scientists to accept theological claims, but consider their impact and influence, if true, on the observations being made in their respective disciplines.

I am compelled to think that each of the noted theologians would agree that a simple reiteration of secular society's truth claims will not compensate for the steady disintegration and fragmentation of social structures. That is, though theology 'must engage [natural and social science] consistently in direct dialogue' (91), it ought not to obscure that knowledge which is garnered from appropriate theological enquiry by suggesting the same conclusions may be seen through natural and social science. Rather theology must say something profoundly strange about such truths as they correspond to the divine Wisdom, the Word of God, Christ. That is, though natural and social sciences are incapable of explaining and/or contemplating the divine Wisdom, theology may be able to invite appropriate questions about the God who is for us,

humanity in a particular world explained by the worldly sciences, if you will, of biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, anthropology, etc. So with a pursuit of interdisciplinary dialogue, the goal ought not to be a complementary resounding of the proverbial gong to claim relevance but a critical reinterpretation of meaning in light of the God who has revealed himself in the person and mission of Jesus Christ, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of the Father—a critical reinterpretation to demonstrate the peculiarity of the theological voice along with the universal significance of its proclamation in a world that is described by natural and social scientific grammar.

Though somewhat critical of how the interdisciplinary argument of this book was constructed, Fisher has produced a very well written and scholarly considered piece, which deserves a careful read (and one that I will pick up again for further reference and consideration). In fact, though I may not agree with how the term of and/or enthusiasm for coherence was used in this book; I will admit that Fisher was careful to demonstrate how cosmic significance may be demonstrated in both the theological and scientific data. This task required a great deal of careful analysis and critical thought that is more than adequately demonstrated in this piece. Thus, this book will do well to further the discussion between the faithful and the secular sciences and should be one to include on the reading list of anyone interested in pursing an understanding of contemporary conversations between science and theology.

Ashley Moyse

***The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*. Eds. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. (761 pp.) [ISBN: 978-0-19-921299-6]**

Of the writing of books about John and Charles Wesley and Methodism there is no end. Arguably Richard Heitzenrater gives the best overview of the hundreds of books so far published (Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley* [Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2003], pp. 345-397). To this extensive list is now added *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* edited by William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby, essentially a tome about Methodism rather than the Wesleys. While Oxford went with Methodist Studies, Cambridge University Press in another 2010 publication, chose to focus on John Wesley (*The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley,* edited by Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers