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Theology for a Nuclear Age, Forty Years On

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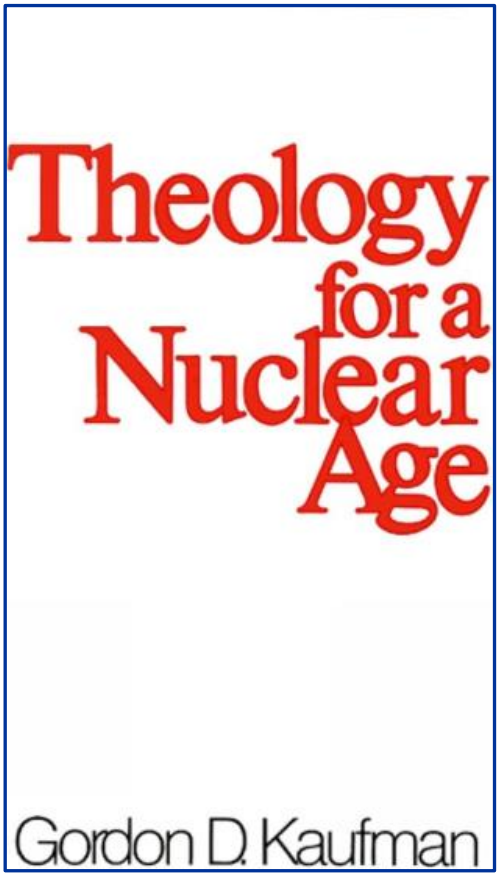
Harvard theologian Gordon D. Kaufman, who died in 2011, was known for his pioneering work in re-assessing and reconstructing theological claims in light of modern scientific knowledge and contemporary challenges. This year, 2025, marks the fortieth anniversary of his provocative little book, *Theology for a Nuclear Age*. The original form of the book was a series of lectures at The University of Manchester (UK), which were, in turn, a development of some ideas Kaufman had sketched in his 1982 presidential address at the American Academy of Religion, "Nuclear Eschatology and the Study of Religion." During those years and beyond, Kaufman was concerned to grapple with the novel circumstances in which we have gained the frightful power to end human life on earth.

> We have gained the frightful power to end human life on earth

The book was a minor splash when it was published in 1985, and it seems worthwhile, forty years later, to reassess its argument. I wish to revisit some of its elements in relation to two contexts: (1) our current global political situation and its dangers, and (2) Kaufman's theological development from 1985 until his death in 2011. The latter context, I ought to say, will be difficult for me to disentangle from my own theological work, as much of the trajectory of my thinking has been shaped by him, whether in appreciation or in reaction.

A central premise of Kaufman's argument, which he took to be self-evident, was the novelty of the nuclear age. The dramatic character of this new capacity for destruction, for Kaufman, had to do with what he would later (in 1993) come to call the "ecological" quality of human agency. "Ecological" here has to do not with environmental concerns but with the feed-forward loops of human action. Kaufman believed that human agency has effects on its own conditions. In other words, the capacity to act, when it is well-directed, strengthens the capacity for further action. The grim alternative, expressed in various ways in human history even under the "normal" circumstances of limitation and weakness, is when human activity undermines its own conditions. In effect, we are free to make ourselves (or our neighbors, or both) less free—or, in the extreme case, *un*free. While, as I say, this has always been true, the "nuclear age" exaggerates the grim aspect of this feed-forward loop because now we can act in such a way that there can never be further human acts.



The radical novelty Kaufman wanted to underscore, therefore, has to do with the fact that our fate—if not our ultimate eschatological fate, then at least our ultimate historical fate—seems to be in our hands. We can end human life. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre analyzed the dim awareness a free individual has that they can, at any time while crossing a bridge, throw themself over the railing and die. The terror of that awareness is the ease with which one could do it, together with the fact that one could do it without much rational deliberation and, indeed, without much motivation. We may have every reason *not* to do it—and yet, even so, the fact remains that we *could* do it, even in the face of the best reasons not to. But, for Kaufman, we now face the dizzying peril of that capacity on the largest conceivable scale. If an individual dies of suicide, there remain many values to which they may have been committed. In addition, there remain redemptive possibilities that are open to those who learn from, or show compassion in response to, the death. But if the human race dies at its own hands, all human values are destroyed. For Kaufman, this means that no redemptive possibilities remain.

It's worth reflecting on the proliferation of "post-apocalyptic" stories in prose and on the screen since the advent of the nuclear age. The imaginary apocalypses in question are not always nuclear in nature, but they suggest a similar catastrophic end to human civilization. The striking feature of these stories is that, by their nature *post*-apocalyptic, they hold open the hope for redemption beyond catastrophe. For Kaufman, or at least for the Kaufman of *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, this reflects an incapacity to wrestle with the enormity of our situation. While it may be possible for human life to continue in chastened and likely degraded form after a nuclear catastrophe, it is also possible, if not likely, that human life will not be able to continue at all. There would be no heartwarming stories of courage, for example. More pointedly, there is nothing for us, in the present, to be curious about or interested in as we try to imagine such a fate.

The theological challenge Kaufman identified, and which he continued to work through for the rest of his career, is that the nuclear age seems to undermine two key planks of traditional theistic belief: divine sovereignty and God's redemptive purposes in the ordering of the world. It is perhaps already evident why these two beliefs come under scrutiny. First, if we now have the capacity to end human life on earth, we have become, if only in a grim sense, masters of our own fate. Though we cannot strengthen our human capacities indefinitely, we can weaken them absolutely. We can bring a sort of final judgment on ourselves that is more radical than the Scriptures imagine God's judgment to be, wiping out not only the existence of the human species, but depriving the universe of any means even to remember us. It would be, in effect, a nearly total ontological negation—one might say, god-like in its finality.

For Kaufman, in this context, claims about God's sovereignty function in an unhelpful way; rather like post-apocalyptic dramas of recent years, it consoles us with the idea that God will not allow all human value to be destroyed. Belief in divine sovereignty, Kaufman believed, blocks us from reckoning with the danger of our situation and therefore impedes us from taking the sort of full responsibility for it that is required if we are

to respond purposively and adequately. To put the point in the dramatic terms characteristic of *Theology for Nuclear Age*, we alone are responsible for what comes of us as a species in this fraught situation of nuclear madness, and any consoling belief in some sort of guaranteed preservation or redemption keeps us from facing the truth.

Faith in God was an acknowledgment that we live in wider contexts of creativity

Nevertheless, Kaufman did not believe that jettisoning the idea of God's sovereignty meant that the idea of God was without value. Following his teacher H. Richard Niebuhr, Kaufman urged that faith in God has a practical meaning. "God" is a word that functions in a particular way, and the function remains significant and practically compelling even when traditional ways of understanding it have become problematic. In a nutshell, "God" has always functioned, first of all, to "relativize" human self-understanding as well as our anthropocentric values. Incorporating the word and idea of "God" into our discourse reminds us of the limitations of our capacities and the incompleteness and questionability of our values. This stark, and largely negative, meaning of "God," for Kaufman, is important in the nuclear age because it helps us recognize and appreciate that our values and vision are always in need of challenge, debate, and reconstruction. As Kaufman's project matured in subsequent years, this negative appreciation for "God" grew toward a more positive affirmation. In his magnum opus, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (1993), Kaufman turned toward "creativity" as the fundamental meaning of the word "God." Faith in God was not simply a stark reminder of limitation—it was an acknowledgment that we live in wider contexts of creativity—the continual emergence of new realities, new insights, and even new values. Importantly, although Kaufman still believed that the particularly *human* expression of divine creativity still fell under the threat of self-destruction, creativity as such is not so threatened. Creativity remains and always will remain. So, while nuclear annihilation would make it impossible for humanity to continue, and would be the end of any creative or redemptive possibilities for humanity, creativity would continue to produce value and beauty, although of a non-human type.

By the time Kaufman wrote his last book, *Jesus and Creativity* (2006), he had arrived at the conviction that the second great symbol invoked in *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, "Christ," has a limited scope and application. "Christ" suggests redemptive possibilities emerging from negative experiences and perhaps even from historical catastrophes. The symbol of Christ helps us understand, for example, how the sufferings of martyrs struggling for racial equality during the Civil Rights movement were part of a "redemptive trajectory" that qualifies and deepens our appreciation for and commitment to God, and gives their sufferings a more capacious meaning that survives to fuel and motivate our current struggles for freedom and justice. But, of course, as we have said, a key animating factor in Kaufman's theology is his conviction that redemptive trajectories can be cut short. In fact, he came to believe, they always are. They operate within tiny corners of the universe, but do not characterize "creativity" as a whole.

I suggest that this clarification of a conviction that was already implicit in *Theology for a Nuclear Age* lends that earlier book a different aura, if you will. If the human project, and all the redemptive possibilities that occur within it, were always going to be of limited scope and duration, then it seems as if "creativity" had always hemmed us in, so to speak. In other words, perhaps the nuclear situation is not quite so radically distinctive as the somewhat younger Kaufman imagined. Whether we die by collective suicide (if it could really be described that way), or by a meteor strike, or by a plague of some sort, the fact remains that, from the perspective of God as creativity, we were always going to arise and pass away. What I'm suggesting is that Kaufman's further theological work, until his death in 2011, suggests a soberer sort of judgment about human agency and our place in the world that erodes somewhat the fervor of his earlier provocations.

A further question we might ask is whether our current global political situation contributes to or suggests modifications of Kaufman's assessment of the nuclear age. In particular, how does Kaufman's claim of the radical novelty of our nuclear capacities fare in the light of nuclear proliferation, the rise of non-state actors with enormous destructive capacities, and other, non-nuclear threats that suggest similarly apocalyptic possibilities? In one sense, these additional scenarios of potential destruction lend broader credibility to Kaufman's concerns about the possible end of human life. However, the proliferation of such considerations invites us to reconsider ancient intuitions on the fragility of life and the recalcitrance and irrationality of evil. To take one example, Claus Westermann has argued that the "Fall" stories in Genesis (in chapters three, four, nine, and eleven) all picture the fate of human beings being tied up with the tendency to attempt futilely to exceed our limitations. Do not

intuitions of catastrophe in the wake of excessive ambitions already figure into ancient accounts of nemesis, tragedy, and evil, in both biblical and non-biblical traditions?

This question raises broader ones. Did Kaufman's aim, dramatically to underscore the need to accept responsibility for our fate in a nuclear age, cause him unnecessarily to pit human agency *against* divine action, as if in a sort of zero-sum equation? Is it true that our capacity to destroy life on earth somehow competes with or renders null traditional claims about divine sovereignty? One could also imagine, for example, claiming (with Kathryn Tanner and others) that God's action is an empowering rather than limiting activity—that it operates not to stifle but to enhance the human capacity to act.[1] In such a case, jettisoning the notion of divine sovereignty over human affairs does not free our sense of responsibility from stultifying consolations as it suggests a different sort of meta-physical context for it—one in which, in existentialist fashion, human agency pushes against fate rather than seeking to consent or align with the benevolent purposes of God. I take it that Kaufman's later reflection on the "creativity" that pervades the universe begins to recoup this ancient sense of a benevolent context of human action, though it perhaps does not go very far.

Further (and relatedly), is it to be taken without reservation as true, as Kaufman seemed to have believed, that redemptive possibilities for humans pertain only to "human life on earth?" Would it not be possible to hold that the physical world we share is not the only locus of redemption but is rather a laboratory or perhaps a crucible in which our capacity to choose the good is tested and refined, only to be perfected in some other realm?

Kaufman's "Christ" is the very meaning of creativity itself

This last question is not a particularly friendly one, I suppose, because it questions the naturalistic and historicist framework that, for apologetic and practical reasons, Kaufman wished to keep intact. Kaufman would not entertain the possibility of a life after this one because recourse to such a hope would, in his judgment, undermine the sense of urgency we need to deal with the existential crisis of human agency he describes in *Theology for a Nuclear Age*. But it seems to me that it is at least worth asking whether a sense of dire emergency at the scale and with the finality Kaufman imagines doesn't produce at least as many problems as it avoids. My sense is that, in a nuclear situation, as in any situation of possible calamity, calm and repose is better than a pins-and-needles sense of urgency. Confidence in the ultimate triumph of good is better than trying to fend off destruction for as long as we can while knowing that our efforts are doomed, in the end, to fail. Moreover, it seems to me that the unique gift of our Christian inheritance is precisely the capacity to look into the face of death and destruction and see God working to bring life and peace—if not in this age, then at least in an age to come. But this would mean that Kaufman's "Christ" is not the denizen of a tiny corner of a universe in which creativity reigns supreme, indifferently to whatever (inevitably parochial) conceptions of the good we may hold to, but is the very meaning of creativity itself, hidden for now but destined to be revealed. But that would make for a somewhat different theology for a nuclear age.

These queries and criticisms notwithstanding, Kaufman's 1985 volume, together with his subsequent work, continue to raise necessary questions for theology today. He invited us to reckon with the fact that death is not just an individual event for theology to grapple with. We must address the question of death today at the collective and species (and, indeed, cosmic) level. If not animated by a sense of grim urgency, then we at least need to cultivate faithful attention.

Thomas A. James is Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Dearborn, Michigan. He is the author of *In Face of Reality: The Constructive Theology of Gordon D. Kaufman* (Pickwick Publications 2011) and co-author, with David True, of *The Transcendence of Desire: A Theology of Political Agency* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). James received his Ph.D. from Union Presbyterian Seminary, where he taught theology and ethics from 2008-2012.

SciTech† welcomes submissions of articles, sermons, letters, and other material for possible publication. *SciTech†* also invites suggestions of topics, books, and other matters of interest readers would like the journal to cover.

Please send suggestions, questions, member news, and correspondence, as well as submissions, to a member of the *SciTech†* Editorial Board.

E-mail addresses are on page 16.

[1] For example, see Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 90ff.

Growing Faith: A Bible Study for Churches about Our Climate Crisis

Rachelle McCalla

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PASTCF Board Member

The excerpt below comes to us from Rachelle McCalla, author of the Bible study. Rachelle is a Presbyterian minister in Iowa, but the Bible study is intended for Christians of any denomination, living anywhere in the world. The entire Bible study is available for free from https://iowafaithandclimate.org/growing-faith/. Iowa Interfaith Power and Light, which funded and distributes the Bible study project, is a non-profit faith-based organization in Iowa that focuses on bringing people of faith together to care for the environment. Individuals and groups are encouraged to download the study and print as many copies of the materials as they need for their group members. The resource download also includes publicity materials to help groups advertise their Bible study to potential participants. Please help spread the word about this free resource.

One key intersection of science, technology, and our Presbyterian faith is caring for creation. Science and technology can help us take better care of the earth. Though it is an ancient book, the Bible can teach us a great deal about caring for the God's creation.

Below, you'll find an excerpt from the free downloadable Bible Study *Growing Faith: What the Parables of the Bible Teach us About Caring for the Earth*. The entire Bible study contains six lessons, along with discussion questions and project ideas for use with groups in your church or community. The six-week format is perfect for Lent, or a springtime study leading up to Earth Day. The lessons are intended to be accessible to a general audience, from older youth through every age of adults.

Each lesson in the Bible study focuses on a different parable from the Bible. Many of these parables involve nature, animals, and the earth. The parables teach us about living out our faith. Through the Bible study, participants can learn how to live out their faith specifically in ways that benefit the environment. Discussion materials with each lesson encourage participants to apply these lessons in ways that can have a positive impact on the ecosystems around them.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Jesus also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. Mark 4:26-34 (NIV)[1]

Jesus taught with parables.

For those of us who seek to follow Jesus, it makes sense that we should study these parables if we're going to understand what Jesus wanted to teach us.

What is a parable, anyway?

A parable is essentially a story—usually a pretty simple story—which is told to illustrate a point. Sometimes we confuse parables with analogies, allegories, and metaphors, all of which involve specific kinds of representation. In parables, some things can represent other things—for example, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed—but not everything in a parable necessarily represents something else. Sometimes the story just is what it is.

Jesus taught with parables.

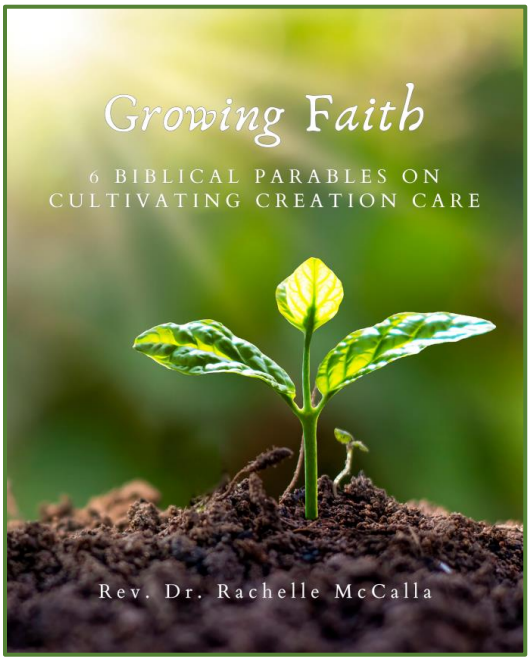
According to Mark's gospel, parables were Jesus' favorite and more-or-less exclusive way of teaching. Yes, Jesus was a teacher, but it might be more accurate to say Jesus was a storyteller.

This Bible study, *Growing Faith*, focuses on parables. Not just Jesus' parables, but all the parables of the Bible. The Old Testament is full of parables, proof that God was a storyteller even before he came to walk among us.

[1] Scripture Quotations taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version, NIV Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

The Bible is full of parables, and Jesus taught using parables. Perhaps most interesting of all, as Jesus drew nearer to the cross—that is, as his earthly ministry progressed and Jesus set his face like a flint toward Jerusalem—Jesus' teaching became even more story-filled.

Instead of doubling down on his teaching points and intensifying his talking-points, instead of yelling and pounding his fists and shouting to get his point across, Jesus almost seemed to relax into these stories—not high-stakes stories of intrigue and conflict, but mundane, commonplace stories about everyday life, all of which served to make Jesus' point: this is what life is all about. A cup of cool water. Helping a stranger. Making wine, lighting a lamp, planting a seed.



The kingdom of God, Jesus tells us, the kingdom of God is like this: a man scatters seed on the ground.

It was called broadcasting.

Broadcasting seed.

Literally, casting the seed on the ground, much like when we had some rainy days recently and I took my big bag of grass seed and a random old plastic cup and scooped up seed and tossed it all over in the bare patches, casting it broadly around.

I was broadcasting.

It's where we get the terms for broadcast journalism and news broadcast. Because sharing news stories widely is a form of scattering seed—the seed of ideas—which is the same thing Jesus did when he told these parables.

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like this: a man broadcasts seed. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows.

When I planted grass seed recently, it took less than ten minutes all told, probably closer to five minutes!

I've watered those grass seeds a few times and the rest of the time God watered it. When I look out over my lawn, it gives me such joy to see what's happening in my yard, right under my nose. Where there was once bare dirt, now there is a carpet of fuzzy baby grass that's growing and getting thicker and stronger every day, and all I did was spend about five minutes broadcasting seed.

The kingdom of God is like this.

The kingdom of God is like broadcasting seed and then—whether you sleep or get up—the seed sprouts and grows. You don't even have to get up. The seed grows even while we're sleeping, even when we're out of town, not looking, not worrying about it or even able to check on it—the seed sprouts and grows.

Sometimes we overcomplicate things.

Sometimes, maybe even most times, we think we're supposed to do significant things. We think it's about *us* and what *we* do.

What if it's not about us, but about the grass, about the seed, about the growing that God does, rather than what we do?

Honestly, what could I do to make that grass grow better? Even if I tried doing something like extra fertilizer or checking on it more often, I'd be just as likely to trample it or hurt it as to help it.

The seed grows all on its own. All we do is broadcast it.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like this."

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed."

Teeny tiny.

So small, if you drop it, you probably won't ever find it again. But from that tiny seed grows a great big shrub, practically a tree, with birds that perch among its branches.

This is perhaps the heart of the lesson Jesus is trying to teach us here—that sometimes it is the smallest things that yield the biggest results.

How often do we refuse to do anything at all because we're afraid it's not big enough? There are seeds we could plant every single day—seeds of change, of growth, renewal, new life—seeds which are tiny all by themselves, but which have the potential to grow together and become an entire field or forest.

Planting seeds is an act of **faith**.

We can't *make* the seeds grow, but we trust they will grow. Planting seeds is an act of **hope**. Some seeds

show results in a single season. Corn! Pumpkins! Marigolds!

Other seeds can take a very, very, very long time to bear fruit.

Fruit trees like plums and cherries often take more than five years before they produce fruit. Pecan and other nut trees can take a decade or more from the time they sprout until you pick your first tasty pecans. And while the trusty olive trees mentioned so often in the Bible may produce a few olives in their younger years and a full harvest every few years during the decades that follow, it's not until the trees are sixty to eighty years old that they produce significant, reliable yields each year.

We can't *make* the seeds grow.

But we can plant them.

This Bible study is specifically about growing faith the way the Bible teaches us through the parables. There's one other part of the subtitle that's very important, though. The full title is, *Growing Faith: What the Parables of the Bible Teach us About Caring for the Earth*.

Why do we care about the Earth?

Lots of reasons! God made the Earth and entrusted it to our care (see Genesis chapters 1-3). God promises to renew the Earth at the end of time (see Revelation chapters 21 and 22). God may be going to renew the Earth, but that doesn't mean we don't need to take care of it. If anything, it means we should take better care of the Earth because God has plans for it.

Finally, Jesus taught us how to be his followers by telling these stories, these parables, each of which highlights different aspects of caring for the Earth, as we'll be discussing in each lesson in this Bible study.

The kingdom of God is like this

What do the parables of the growing seeds and mustard seed teach us about caring for the Earth? They teach us that small things get big. Actions that may seem inconsequential—like those five minutes I spent broadcasting grass seed in my yard—can have effects that last for years and years!

This lesson should strengthen our faith and give us hope.

So often when we consider what we can do to care for the Earth, it seems really small. What does my recycling matter when so many other households and corporations have so much more recycling to do? What does it matter if I put solar panels on my roof when there are so many other roofs in town that don't have them?

It can begin to feel hopeless. It's tempting to think that because we can't do everything, there's no point in doing anything.

This is precisely the attitude Jesus challenges in these parables.

If the farmer hadn't broadcast the seed, would he ever reap a harvest?

Of course not! That's completely obvious!

And yet, how often do we fall prey to defeatist thinking, convinced we will fail before we even start to try?

Yes, I am just one person.

But Jesus said, one person went out and broadcast seed.

The seeds were small.

And yet, the seeds were enough. They grew, night and day, the seeds grew to produce a harvest that was many times over what had been planted.

When we think about the lesson of the tiny mustard seed becoming a large shrub almost like a tree, we can remember that small things get big, and take hope knowing that even the smallest acts—tossing that bottle in the recycling instead of the trash, setting our thermostats on more energy efficient settings, even hanging a load of laundry out to dry instead of using a machine—all of these small things are like tiny seeds planted in the ground. They may be small, they may even seem to "get lost" among all the other things we and others do each day, but they matter in God's sight and in God's kingdom.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like this!"

There's another lesson in these parables, besides small things getting big, and that is: we don't control the growth. God does.

When the farmer planted the seed, whether he slept or got up, the seed grew. We can't *make* things grow. We can't guarantee our efforts will be successful. I confess, I sometimes wonder if it matters that I bother to recycle. How do I know if the recycling company is being good stewards of the recyclables I haul out to them? What if they just turn around and bury it in the landfill with all the trash? Doubts creep in and cause me to wonder if my efforts mean anything.

In the parable that Jesus told about the seeds, the farmer broadcast the seed and then went to bed. We can't be sure, but from the way Jesus tells the story, it sounds like the farmer slept peacefully. He wasn't up at night wondering if the seed would sprout or worrying about germination rates or watering schedules. In fact, in Jesus' day, God did most of the watering for the farmers—center pivot irrigation systems wouldn't be invented for many more hundreds of years!

Who makes the seeds grow? Not the farmer. The farmer plants the seeds, but God makes them grow. In this parable, we who plant seeds are partners with God in bringing about the harvest.

This should be reassuring to all of us, especially when we feel frustrated or afraid of the state of the world. Yes, there is much work to be done. It can feel overwhelming. However, as Jesus reminds us in this parable, whether we sleep or get up, God is at work bringing growth and new life.

We don't do it alone. God helps us! We just plant the seeds.

Questions to consider:

1) When you think about caring for the Earth, what "seeds" would you like to plant? That is, what small steps can you take to be a better steward of God's good creation? Are there things you are already doing? Is there more you would like to do?
2) Share two (or more!) aspects of God's kingdom that you thought about when reading this parable Jesus taught in Mark's gospel. How might these relate to the idea of caring for the Earth?
3) According to this parable, what is God's kingdom like? When you think about earthly kingdoms and nations, what aspects of them are the same as those of God's kingdom? What aspects are different?
4) Jesus used parables and stories to convey the ideas he wanted to teach. What do you like best about parables? Do you ever disagree with the ways some people interpret parables? Do you agree with the interpretation of the parable of the seed presented here?
5) What are your favorite kinds of seeds to plant? What feelings do you experience when planting seeds? Do you feel similar feelings when you do things to care for the Earth? How are these activities similar? How are they different?

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Recent Scholarship on Science, Technology, and Religion

E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr.

SciTech† Editor

Individuals, families, churches, denominations, and the broader society are, in various ways, concerned with science, technology, and the Christian faith. These areas of life influence, interact with, and respond to each other. They are at the heart of PASTCF.

While ministers of Word and Sacrament, ruling elders, deacons, and laity are affected by and contend with the continuingly changing landscape of science, technology, and the Christian faith, so too do academics in a range of disciplines and fields of study.

In recent months, two professional organizations concerned with religion and ethics held their annual meetings. In late November, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) met in San Diego and the Society of Christian Ethics (SCE) gathered in Chicago in early January. In keeping with past practice, the AAR's meeting was held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the SCE's meeting was held concurrently with the annual meetings of the Society of Jewish Ethics and Society for the Study of Muslim Ethics. While the AAR's purview is quite wide, the SCE's is more narrow and explicitly Christian. Even so, science and technology were the subjects of several paper presentations and panel discussions at both meetings.

This article calls attention to various ways science, technology, and religion in general, or the Christian faith in particular, were approached at the AAR and SCE, as a way to highlight some recent scholarship in these areas. The list below includes the titles of paper presentations, panel discussions, and other gatherings, along with brief descriptions of each.

At the 2024 annual meeting of the AAR, over a dozen paper presentations and panels discussion were devoted to one or more aspects of science and technology:

- **Society of Christian Philosophers, Theme: Does Science Need Theology?** A discussion of potential ramifications of "Why Science Needs Philosophy," Lucis Laplane, et al, *PNAS* (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*), March 5, 2019, 116 (10), 3948-3952, available online.
- **Science, Technology, and Religion Unit, Theme: Author Meets Critics Book Panel: *Critical Approaches to Science and Religion* (Myrna Perez, Ahmed Ragab, and Terence Keel, eds.)** Panel discussion and responses by two of the book's editors, with attention to three methodological approaches used in the book to provide novel viewpoints on enduring questions pertaining to religion and science: critical race theory, feminist and queer theory, and postcolonial theory.
- **Cognitive Science of Religion Unit, Theme: Current Theories and Applications of the Cognitive Science of Religion.** An international panel focused on leading-edge research that employs up-to-date cognitive theories in the study of religion and associated observable facts or events.
- **Science, Technology, and Religion Unit, Theme: Author Meets Critics: Peter Harrison's *Some New World: Myths of Supernatural Belief in a Secular Age*** (Cambridge University Press, 2024). Critical consideration of Harrison's most recent book, with the author responding.
- **International Society for Science and Religion, Theme: Religion and Science Hospitality Event.** Reception and informal discussion sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation and hosted by *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, International Society for Science and Religion. Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, The Zygon Center for Religion and Science, and CASIRAS (Center for Advanced Study in Religion and Science).
- **International Society for Science and Religion, Theme: Book panel discussion on *God and the Book of Nature: Experiments in Theology of Science*, ed. Mark Harris** (Routledge, 2024). A group of commentators discussed a recently published collection of essays that resulted from collaboration between academics in various disciplines, working at over ten universities in Europe and the U.S. and associated with the "God and the Book of Nature" project.
- **Teaching Religion Unit and Transformative Scholarship and Pedagogy Unit, Theme: Resisting Climate Violence through Science-Engaged Theological Education.** A symposium of faculty who were part of the initial grant from the Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion's (DoSER's) "Climate Science in Theological Education project." DoSER itself is a project of The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).
- **Ethics Unit, Theme: Technology as an Existential Threat.** Papers by five professors on a diverse set of topics related to how various technologies present threats to human existence.
- **Body and Religion Unit, Theme: Bioenhancement Technologies and the Vulnerable Body**. A conversation among participants from various religious traditions who emphasize the importance of the perspectives that minority individuals and communities provide into biomedical enhancement technologies.
- **Chinese Religions Unit and Indian and Chinese Religions in Dialogue Unit, Theme: Bodies and Technologies of Reproduction.** Scholars focused on a range of subjects, societies, and eras converse about the human body and technologies related to reproduction.
- **Religion and Science Fiction Unit and Teaching Religion Unit, Theme: Imagining Other Worlds: Teaching Religious Studies and Ethics Through Science Fiction.** Panelists explored the pedagogical potential of science fiction for teaching about religion and ethics.
- **Artificial Intelligence and Religion Exploratory Session, Theme: Understanding Artificial Intelligence and Religion: Theoretical Explorations.** An exchange about ways various aspects of religion influence and are influenced by AI, especially sympathetic care of those with dementia, the concept of "special things" advanced by Ann Taves, and the potential benefit of applying AI to the analysis of certain aspects of religious rituals.
- **Human Enhancement and Transhumanism Unit, Theme: Justice, (In)humanity, and Moral Reasoning in Technological Enhancement.** Three papers investigated different facets of seeing the transhuman as a topic urgently needing moral consideration: approached by questioning the notion of moral progress regarding race and slavery, destructive inferences deriving from Nietzsche's concept of "superhuman", and African traditions' paucity of interest in human enhancement.

SCE The Society of Christian Ethics

Technology and Artificial Intelligence were center stage for five papers presented at the SCE's 2025 annual meeting, whose authors approached those features of contemporary life from various perspectives.

- **Health Care Ethics: A Conversation with Luca Valera on NeuroRights.** Luca Valera, Universidad de Valladolid; Ben Parks, Mercy College.
- **Evangelical Ethics: Restlessness and Belonging: Autumn Ridenour on Augustinian Wisdom for the Digital Empire.** Autumn Alcott Ridenour, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; Toni Alimi, Cornell University; Conor M. Kelly, Marquette University.
- **Neuroethics and Theology Interest Group: Losing Our Minds? Ethical, Philosophical, and Theological Questions Regarding Artificial Intelligence and Neurotechnology.** Pablo Rivas, Baylor University; Joseph M. Vukov, Loyola University Chicago; Paul Scherz, University of Notre Dame.
- **A Christian, Ethical Response to Brain Computer Interfaces like Elon Musk's Neuralink.** Myriam Renaud, DePaul University.
- **Bending the Biotechnological Arc Back Toward Justice: A Critique of Historic and Contemporary Rhetorics of Scientific Progress.** Emma McDonald Kennedy, Villanova University.

SCE annual meetings also include opportunities to have conversations with authors, who are SCE members, about books they published the previous year. These breakfast gatherings are held in a large room in which each table is designated for a specific book and author, who discusses his or her publication with a few others. At the 2025 meeting, three such conversations were held with authors whose 2024 books focus on science or technology:

- *Architecture, Theology, and Ethics: Making Architectural Design More Just*, Elise M. Edwards (Lexington Books)
- *Encountering Artificial Intelligence: Ethical and Anthropological Investigations*, Matthew J. Gaudet (Wipf and Stock)
- *Ecological Moral Character: A Catholic Model*, Nancy M. Rourke (Georgetown University Press)

For more information, see the SCE 2025 Program, available online:

https://soce.memberclicks.net/assets/2025AnnualMeeting/FULL_%20SCE%202025%20Final%20Program_v.12_1.8.25.pdf

President's Column

Serendipity and the Rewriting of History

Arnold H. Rots

We are all aware that scientific research sometimes leads to unexpected discoveries. Alexander Fleming's accidental discovery of penicillin is a well-known example, when he noticed that bacteria were being killed in a neglected petri dish in which mold had been developing. A study recently published in *Research Policy* has tried to quantify the occurrence of such serendipitous discoveries by going through 1.2 million publications produced from 90,000 NIH grants. Not by the research group that produced the study actually reading all these papers, but by training a machine learning algorithm to analyze them.

The conclusion was that a third of the grants yielded a significant discovery outside the research goals of the project funded by the grant. That may or may not be a surprise (though it is certainly welcome news), but there is more that can be learned from this study. Large grants more often yield serendipitous results than smaller grants. Presumably, research teams that are financially less constrained are more likely to notice, and follow up on, unexpected results. And projects with a narrow, specific focus on producing a desired result are less likely to do so. This, of course, argues in favor of broad academic freedom and support for basic scientific research. Pressing for quick results and telling researchers not to waste money on "irrelevant results" is counterproductive. Another category of fewer serendipitous results: PhD theses. Why? PhD students are generally very focused and time constrained. And they are, let's say, inexperienced.

That rang a bell for me, personally. And I realized that I had been guilty in this respect. While working on my doctoral thesis, my mentor Morton Roberts (although not my thesis advisor) and I published a very short paper in 1973 on galaxy masses. My thesis project was on the distribution and kinematics of neutral atomic hydrogen gas in the spiral galaxy M81, in Ursa Major. We noticed that in M81, as well as in two other galaxies (M31 and M101), and our own galaxy, the rotation indicated that there was much more mass, especially in the outer regions, than could be accounted for with observed matter. I put that aside, as I was focused on

the distribution and motions of the gas associated with the spiral structure. Several years later, Vera Rubin was intrigued by the conundrum posed by that surplus mass and was smart enough to follow up on it. Thus, we now know about dark matter – and even though we still don't know what it is, we do know that there is a lot of it: more than five times as much as "normal" baryonic matter (i.e., the kind of matter that makes up stars, planets, and living organisms). And then there is Dark Energy; but that is something for another story.

The history of science is at risk of being rewritten

Vera deserved a Nobel Prize; no need to guess the reason why she didn't get one. But her name also came up recently in another context. Science faces an uncertain future in the U.S. these days and there are many reasons to be concerned—alarmed, even. But what I had not expected was that, in the name of ideological compliance (after banned books we now have banned words), the history of science is also at risk of being rewritten. Yet here it is. Vera Rubin's biography on the website of the Vera Rubin Observatory has been changed to remove any language that could be interpreted as supporting DEI[1]. It's another low point. Vera faced many challenges in her career. She was a strong (and kind!) woman and she is a perfect role model.

A postscript on a different subject. The State of the Nation Project has issued a national progress report[2]. That report card is not pretty. I recommend the executive summary. Three of the top-level conclusions:

- We are a nation of extremes—extreme successes and extreme failures.
- Our national trends are improving in more areas than we are declining. However, relative to other countries, the opposite is true—we are declining in more areas than we are improving.
- Our rising incomes are not translating into greater perceived well-being and social relations.

More depressing news to ponder in these chaotic days…

I apologize.

[1] https://www.propublica.org/article/vera-rubin-astronomer-dei-trump

PASTCF Awards

Call for Nominations

The Presbyterian Association on Science, Technology and the Christian Faith recognizes members of the Presbyterian Church (USA) who have distinguished themselves in the furtherance of PASTCF's objectives, either in the church or in the wider society, with two types of awards. The Board invites members to submit nominations for 2025 award recipients.

The Daniel W. Martin Recognition
"Science as Christian Vocation"

This award recognizes Presbyterian scientific and technology professionals whose lives demonstrate that scientific endeavor, science teaching, and technological development are all parts of God's calling, and part of their call to serve God's people and the world through their professional work.

In considering nominees, the Board is looking particularly for two qualities: (1) in what ways has the nominee's Christian commitment affected how he or she understands and performs his or her professional work; and (2) in what ways have insights gained from his or her professional work enhanced and enriched the nominee's understanding of and commitment to the Christian faith.

The Kenneth E. McCall Recognition
"Excellence in Science, Technology, and Christian Faith Ministry"

This award recognizes a member of the PC(USA) who has demonstrated excellence in helping the denomination engage science and technology as these bear on the PC(USA)'s faith and practice.

In considering nominees, the Board is looking particularly for two qualities: (1) in what ways has the nominee demonstrated personal engagement with science, technology and the Christian faith; and (2) in what ways has the nominee helped the PC(USA) at the congregational level or above realize such engagement in its life and work.

Please consider whether someone you know, or know of, may be deserving of these recognitions. Nomination Forms, the Call for Nominations, and FAQs about the recognitions may be downloaded from the PASTCF website.

[2] https://stateofnation.org/

PC(USA) on the Nuclear Age and Climate Change

Two articles in this issue of *SciTech†* focus on conditions of continuing importance for Christian faith and practice: the nuclear age and climate change. Some of the various statements, policy papers, articles and other materials pertaining to both topics produced by or shared with The Presbyterian Church (USA) are noted below, along with an item by the Presbyterian News Service and an article in *American Presbyterians*. See the online version of this issue of *SciTech†* for links to all materials listed below, except for the article from *American Presbyterians*.

The Nuclear Age

"Presbyterians and Nuclear Weapons: Fifty Years of a Life-and-Death Issue," Rick Nutt, *American Presbyterians*, 73:2 (Summer 1995), pp. 125-134

"Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age: A Policy Statement Adopted by the 200th General Assembly" (1988)

"Statements on Nuclear Weapons and Disarmament by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Its Predecessors: A Brief Summary." (June 2004)

"The Nuclear Freeze," Presbyterian Historical Society Blog (September 9, 2014)

"General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Passes an 'Overture' Calling for a Nuclear Free World." (2018)

"Nuclear Disarmament — Renewing Hope, Against all Odds" (2018)

"Joint Interfaith Statement on the 75th Anniversary of the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (2020)

"PC(USA) supports nuclear weapons ban treaty," Presbyterian News Service (2021)

Climate Change

"Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice," Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Statement on Global Climate Change, an excerpt from the 1990 General Assembly policy paper

"Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Policy Brief - Environment and Energy" (2010)

"Collaborative Agenda on Environmental Stewardship" (2016)

"Let's Talk Faith & Climate" (2018)

"The Precautionary Principle: Managing Technological Risks to Protect Humanity and our Planet" (2018)

"Moving Forward: A Guide to Climate Action for Your Congregation and Community" (2019)

"Columbia Theological Seminary ethics scholar looks at how climate change impacts conflict and violence" (2024)

Of Interest

Online science and religion videos

One of the leading organizations involved in research about religion and science is the University of Oxford's Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion. The Centre's "About Us" webpage provides this description:

> The Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion (IRC) conducts research into religious beliefs and theological concepts in relation to the sciences.
>
> Research into beliefs focuses on the application of scientific tools to religious phenomena, such as in the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). Research into theological concepts focuses principally on those metaphysical principles, such as persons, that are important to theology and are being seen from new perspectives by current developments in science.
>
> Members of the Centre also carry out extensive work on the history of science and religion, often challenging simplistic accounts of what has been a complex and varied interaction. Besides research, the Centre also runs a series of public seminars, generally once every two weeks during term time.

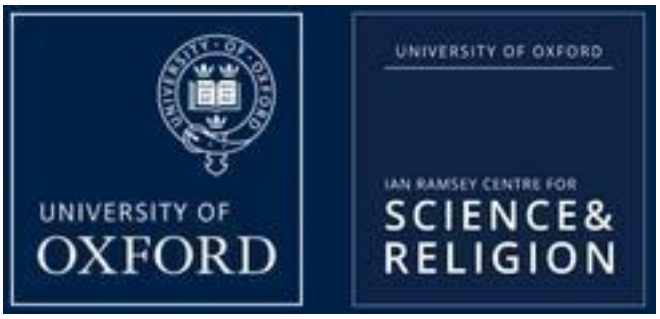
A sizeable collection of videos is available to the public, through the Video link on the Centre's homepage[1] and on YouTube,[2] including a series of twenty-seven short

[1] https://www.ianramseycentre.ox.ac.uk/home

[2] https://www.youtube.com/@IanRamseyCentre/videos

presentations by Alister McGrath, one of the preeminent scholars of science and religion. All 27 of these videos are six to nine minutes long and may be especially useful in churches and schools. Each film introduces a different topic pertaining to science, faith, and religion:[1]

1. Introducing the Field
2. A Personal Journey
3. The Warfare of Science and Religion?
4. Science and Faith: Different Maps of Reality
5. What does it mean to explain something?
6. How do we develop theories?
7. How do we find the best explanation?
8. Faith and Proof in Science
9. Faith and Proof in Religion
10. Scientism: Exploring the Limits of the Sciences
11. Can God "explain" anything?
12. Watching the Heavens: Copernicus and Kepler
13. Isaac Newton and the Mechanical Universe
14. Miracles and the Laws of Nature
15. How does God act in the world?
16. Darwin, Evolution, and God
17. Albert Einstein on Science and Faith
18. The Big Bang: Creation and Cosmology
19. A Fine-Tuned Universe
20. Models and Analogies in Science
21. Models and Analogies in Religion
22. Reductionism in Science and Religion
23. Science, Religion, and the Meaning of Life
24. Science, Religion and Moral Values
25. Science and Religion: Natural Theology
26. Science and Religion: Mystery in Science and Religion
27. Conclusion: Framing the Relation of Science & Religion



[1] https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZggb9UjpEESr9H82eXa245lB-3f7qjJj

COVID's Impact on U.S. and Religion

On February 12, The Pew Research Center released a study titled "5 Years Later: America Looks Back at the Impact of COVID-19."[2] The report's third section focuses on COVID's effect on religion in the United States: "How the COVID-19 pandemic affected U.S. religious life."[3] The study notes that although "The COVID-19 pandemic had an enormous impact on how religious communities gather for worship," the Center's study, conducted in October 2024, shows "most Americans say their religious and spiritual lives have not been changed by the pandemic." Moreover, "survey findings paint a picture of remarkable stability in U.S. religious life during a time of widespread upheaval."

Pew Research Center

Based on responses from those who participated in the survey, graphics show percentages of Americans who claim COVID-19 had much, a little, or no effect on their spiritual or religion life; U.S. adults who report the pandemic's impact on their religious or spiritual life was positive, negative, or of no influence; and the proportion of Americans who participated, virtually or in person, in religious services from the beginning of the pandemic to the present. The report also includes details about the significance of the pandemic on religious groups by ethnicity/race and patterns of participation in religious services within demographic and religious subdivisions.

SciTech† Themes for 2025

Education
May 2025

100th Anniversary
Scopes "Monkey" Trial
August 2025

Quantum Physics
November 2025

[2] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/02/12/5-years-later-america-looks-back-at-the-impact-of-covid-19/

[3] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/02/12/how-the-covid-19-pandemic-affected-u-s-religious-life/

Have You Read?

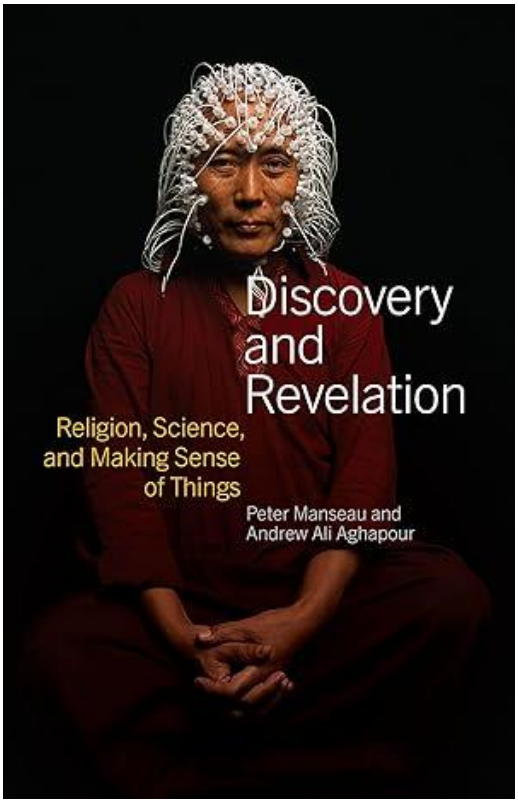
Discovery and Revelation: Religion, Science, and Making Sense of Things.

Peter Manseau and Andrew Ali Aghapour. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2022. 159 pages.

Reviewed by E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr.

SciTech† Editor

This delightfully informative, intellectually stimulating, and beautifully produced book adds a neglected perspective to learning about science, religion, and the relationships between them, especially in the United States. Based on an exhibit of the same name, which ran for over a year at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, *Discovery and Revelation* is a novel and important contribution to the growing body of literature about religion and science.



Manseau is the Lilly Endowment Curator of American Religious History at the National Museum of American History, where co-author Aghapour is a consulting scholar of religion and science.

The book is divided into three major sections: Revolutions, Evolutions, and Complexity, each consisting of 1-page introductions followed by eight short articles. All articles are short, 3 or 5 pages each, with the exception of a 7-page article on "Trial of the Century," about the so-called Scopes "Monkey" Trial of 1925.

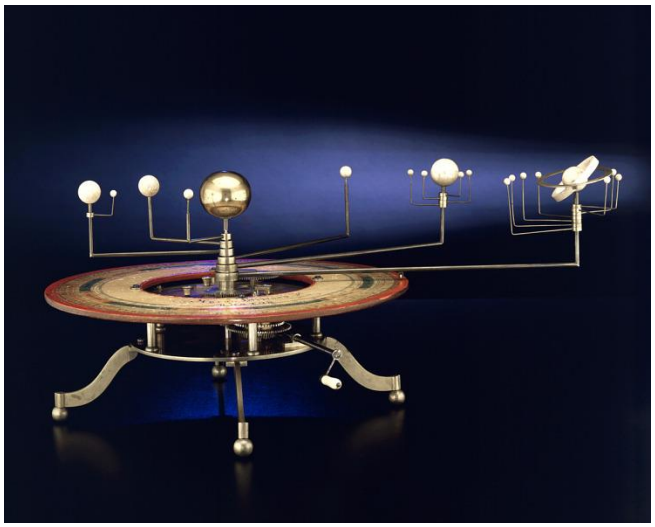
An instructive Introduction helps readers understand the approach taken in the book and explains its connection to the Smithsonian exhibit, which was described in the "Religion, Scripture, and Science on Display in D.C." article in the May 2023 issue of *SciTech†*.

In addition to covering significant persons and events related to science and religion, which are well known to many, *Discovery and Revelation* also gives attention to individuals whose connections with religion and science are not as widely understood or appreciated.

Moreover, while articles such as "And Yet it Moves," "The Bible Surgeon," "Darwin in America," "Trial of the Century," and "Playing Dice with the Universe" cover familiar ground—Galileo, the so-called Jefferson Bible, Darwin, the Scopes "Monkey" Trial, and Einstein, respectively—these topics gain perspective and become more real to readers through photographs of physical objects depicted with each: a letter Galileo wrote while under house arrest in 1635 to Nicolas Peiresc, expressing the fear Galileo had that his many discoveries, obtained through science, may be stifled; the English New Testament from which Thomas Jefferson cut selected passages which he then pasted into the collage he titled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English*; Asa Gray (a scientist and devout Christian) and Rabbi Kaufman Kohler, both of whom supported Darwin and saw no conflict between evolution and their respective religious traditions, and geologist Louis Aggasiz who instead favored polygenism and creationism; outhouses close to the location of the Scopes trial with a "Read Your BIBLE" sign displayed on them; and Einstein's pipe.

Lesser known individuals and circumstances are covered in articles titled "Thomas Paine's Clockwork Universe," about the importance of orreries for the development of Paine's religious perspective, which significantly differed from the dominant Christian worldview of his time; "Religious Freedom and the Air We Breathe," that describes the minister, chemist, political theorist, and natural philosopher Joseph Priestley's contributions to religious freedom; "Our Celestial Visitant," a discussion of the importance of comets for William Miller and his Millerite followers, and, years later, for Ellen Harding Baker (1847-1888), an astronomer and educator who created a "Solar System" quilt; "Her Heavenly Radium," highlighting the influences of Marie Curie's discovery of radium on religious belief and understandings of the Earth's age, as well as the interest she and her husband, Pierre Curie, had in the séances of Eusapia Palladino, a touring medium from Italy; and "Your Brain on God," that recounts some of the ways scientific research has been conducted in recent decades on practitioners of various religious traditions, including meditating Buddhist monks and

nuns as well as the ceremonial use of peyote by Native Americans.



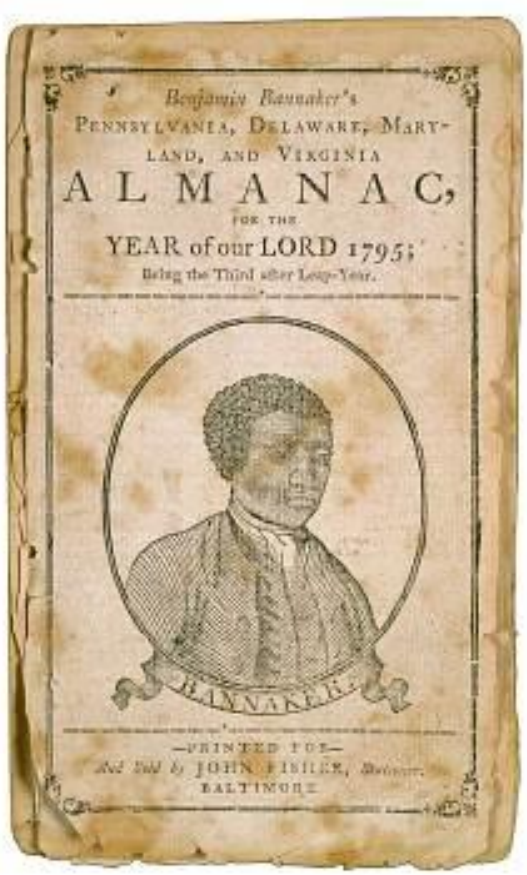
An orrery, circa 1820

Although best known for his connection to the Salem witch trials in colonial Massachusetts, in "Something of Ye Small-Pox" readers learn about the importance Puritan minister Cotton Mather also had for medicine and science in America. "A Pharmacist's Herb Garden" explores Sister Francis Xavier Hebert's compounding of medicines from plants in a garden she grew during the second quarter of the 18th century, which were used in the hospital she and other members of an Ursuline religious community established in New Orleans.

"What Hath God Wrought" takes us into the early days of the telegraph and how that invention contributed to extensive changes in religion in the United States. Samuel F. B. Morse was a devout Christian and used the phrase "What Hath God Wrought," from Numbers 23:23, in the inaugural telegraph he sent in 1844 from the U.S. Capital to Baltimore, Maryland. Spiritualists, whose first magazine was titled *The Spiritual Telegraph*, the Oneida Community, and various other religious persons and groups interpreted the telegraph and other new technologies of the mid-nineteenth century as largely positive developments and anticipated great contributions to the cause of religion from them.

While many people know about one or more accomplishments of inventor, astronomer, naturalist, and inventor Benjamin Banneker, few may have heard about the almanacs he produced over a period of several years and ways that the religious interests of this Black farmer dovetailed with his scientific and other achievements.

Banneker included descriptions of his dreams and church feast days along with forecasts for eclipses in his astronomical journal. He also corresponded with leading figures of the new United States, including Thomas Jefferson. As the book notes, "Banneker was the first Black man to directly and publicly challenge Jefferson's prejudiced assumptions [about race] and the exchange [of letters between Banneker and Jefferson] was circulated widely by abolitionists in the United States and Great Britain."



Cover of *Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia Almanac*, 1795, by Benjamin Banneker

A prominent feature of the book is its many interesting photographs and reproductions of historic artifacts. The numerous engaging images and short articles combine to produce a book that is visually appealing and easy to read. College students find the book especially attractive, particularly in the way *Discovery and Revelation* brings together celebrated as well as obscure but fascinating persons and events, thereby making tangible many aspects of science, faith, and religion that often seem quite remote from students' own lives and experiences. Endnotes for each article appear at the end of the book, providing a useful list of source material. Highly recommended.

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Presbyterian Association on Science, Technology, and the Christian Faith

General Purpose: To challenge and assist the Presbyterian Church (USA), at all levels, to study, understand, discuss, and act on the implications of science and technology as they affect the theology, worship, practice, and moral actions of the church; and to challenge and assist Presbyterian scientists, engineers, and other technical professionals to study, understand, discuss, and act on the implications of the Reformed theological tradition for their scientific and technical vocations. **Objectives**: (1) To provide for the exchange of ideas and information among the members and to develop programs as appropriate to the interest of the members and the needs of the church. (2) To assist the membership in providing leadership for educational opportunities in congregations and presbyteries and to encourage the formation of groups for study and action. (3) To recognize scientific and technological professions as expressions of Christian vocation. (4) To provide a national forum for discussion and exchange of ideas and information in the church. (5) To encourage Presbyterian educational institutions to provide educational opportunities for students and faculty and continuing education for pastors in the area of science, technology, and the Christian faith. (6) To cooperate with other Christian communities and associations with similar purposes. (7) To sponsor national, regional, or local conferences.

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