Did the Reformation in any way favour the development of modern science? Ever since Robert Merton in the 1930s argued that there was a positive connection between key values of the English Puritans and the experimental natural philosophy as it developed in seventeenth-century England the religious origins of modern science have been the subject of an ongoing discussion. Now Peter Harrison adds a new twist by focusing on a specific element of early modern theology, the interpretation of the Fall of Man and the assessment of its consequences for the moral and cognitive condition of man. As a result of the Fall, the human race was morally corrupted, but in what sense also man’s ability to know nature was affected? Adam had had superior knowledge and direct access to the essence of things, but what about his progeny? According to the Catholic interpretation, canonized by Thomas Aquinas, man had only lost his supernatural abilities and retained most of his natural gifts and therefore was still able to know nature as it really was. The great Reformers on the other hand favoured a specific Augustinian tradition which stressed that as a consequence of the Fall all of man’s cognitive powers had been seriously weakened, if not annihilated. Yet, strikingly, in the Calvinist tradition this pessimistic account of the Fall only stimulated natural philosophers to try and do their best to repair this loss through a programme of intensive and collective study of nature. On the basis of the Calvinist anthropology, Francis Bacon propagated the meticulous collection of matters of fact and the use of experimental procedures as the best means to remedy some of the dire consequences of the Fall. Acquiring knowledge about the natural world was something no man could do all by himself and the mind of man, unruly as it was as a consequence of the Fall, could only acquire reliable knowledge as long as it was subjected to the strict rules of the experimental method. The experimental philosophy of the early Royal Society (1662) and some of its founders (Hooke, Boyle, Glanvill, and others) is thus presented by Harrison as rooted in the pessimistic theology of Calvin. Thus once again the Protestant Reformation surfaces as one of the driving forces behind the Scientific Revolution.

This short summary of Peter Harrison’s book in no way does justice to its nuanced and detailed exposition of its main thesis. Harrison not only spells out the relation between the Protestant Reformation and the experimental philosophy of Bacon and the Royal Society, he also gives a well-informed survey of ideas about the Fall of Man as expounded by Jewish, early Christian, and medieval theologians and philosophers. Much is also said about alternative
'solutions' for the loss of man's cognitive abilities, be they esoteric, or mathematical, or linguistic. Furthermore, due attention is given to the Augustinian interpretation of the Fall in the Lutheran Church (Luther was as pessimistic in this regard as Calvin was) and some Catholic circles (mainly the Jansenists). The book is a wonderful read and on each and every page one finds something to reflect on. It is a constant invitation to reconsider what we thought we knew about the relation between theology and the development of modern science. Most illuminating is how Harrison, building on earlier work of Shapin and Schaffer, shows that the experimental method, which was in the mid-seventeenth century regarded by many as counterintuitive, laborious, and hardly productive, was presented by its proponents as the best way to achieve results, even though the knowledge that was thus acquired was not as certain as the Aristotelian concept of science demanded. Today we take for granted that the experimental method is the best way to attain knowledge about the natural world, but in the mid-seventeenth century this was not yet the case and the method was still very much contested. The essential role of the theology of the Fall had thus far escaped historians of science, but Harrison has set us right and we must be grateful to him for doing so.

Still, after reading this book I have two reservations that I cannot dismiss. The first is a methodological issue. Calvin was pessimistic about man's ability to know nature after the Fall, but there is no commanding reason why those who agreed with him on this point had to choose the activist course taken by Bacon and the other experimental philosophers. There were other options, like resignation, divine illumination, or Mosaic, that is Biblical science. Another possibility was the study of the mathematical structure of nature, a path chosen among others by Kepler and Descartes. (Harrison has the habit of continuously downplaying the influence of especially Descartes, who was not very much concerned with the Fall, but I wonder whether this is justified.) The impression one gets from reading Bacon and his followers is that they were not forced to articulate an experimental programme as a consequence of their interpretation of the Fall and corresponding anthropology, but instead already had this activist approach to nature and only used the Calvinist interpretation of the Fall as a sanction of their undertakings. These theories and interpretations did not motivate them to practice the experimental method, but only convinced them that they were on the right track, after the event as it were. Science is not a matter of methods and theories generating scientific practices, but of knowledge-making practices being justified by philosophical foundations—like in this case the Calvinist interpretation of the Fall. Harrison is not clear at this point and he sometimes seems to suggest that there is more to it than mere