Michael Welker (ed.)


This book represents a collection of papers delivered at the symposium in Heidelberg in 2009 supported by the John Templeton Foundation. Since most discussions on science and theology do not touch upon the issues of the Holy Spirit this book seems to be very timely.

It is not surprising that the major contribution to this book is made by theologians because any form of speech about the Spirit creates a predicament for scientists. In the opening paper, J. Polkinghorne appeals to the analogy of information which accompanies physical-biological structures and sustains their material integrity: “The concept of active information offers a way of thinking about the providential action of the Spirit, guiding the unfolding work of continuing creation” (9). Practically all authors admit that the most transparent sphere where one can speak of the Spirit is the realm of humanity: “the emergence of personhood through the Spirit’s immanent work in the created order is precisely what one might expect” (D. Alexander, 25). Biologist Jeffrey Schloss makes this point more explicit by saying that he takes “spirit to refer simply ... to the distinguishing principle of life” (27). But the Spirit is not only responsible for emergence of persons, the Spirit is present in humanity as making possible scientific research, treated as understanding the world “in light of the spirit’s invitation” (33); scientific process becomes a particular explication of the action of the Spirit in the world.

J. Moltmann then links the issue of the Spirit with the future of the universe, as fashioning it in the perspective of what was planned by God before creation in the same way as “mortal life is aligned towards eternal life” (68). In application to science this manifests that, while the human spirit investigates nature, the meaning of what is known remains obscure. A theological interpretation comes to the fore to clarify the sense of creation by reading “the book of nature’ in the light of the book of God’s promises” (78). The transition from creation to new creation thus is explicated through the process of clarification of the sense of the known by the Spirit.

A Lutheran theologian, F. Nüssel, shares an interesting insight: creation and the Incarnation are linked by the Spirit in the same way as the Spirit witnesses to the unity of the Father and the Son. Thus the tension between contingency and necessity of the created universe is reconciled by the Holy Spirit: “there is no gap between creation and new creation” (131). M. Welker advocates that knowledge of the world is the work of the human spirit and
its creativity (134). However the possibility of this knowledge, its ability to overcome spatial and temporal distances, requires a theological clarification through the forces of new creation “revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit” (139). These forces must not be treated only eschatologically, but are considered as present in the development of the scientific and social world, making the dialogue between theology and science indispensable for the manifestation of the Spirit.

The contribution of science towards this realised eschatological ideal through its para-eucharistic dimension is not an easy task to achieve. This is because science is functioning in the conditions of the world after the Fall which connotes with the term “hell” used in the title of the paper of R. Papadopoulos—with a famous quote from the 20th century’s Orthodox Saint Silouan the Athonite “Keep Thy Mind in Hell and Despair Not”. Hell has connotations with modern science, in particular, when it treats reality in terms of chaos and instability. The “despair not” serves as an ascetic mechanism which transforms and turns one’s mind and heart to the very possibility of New Creation. That implies that it can then be treated as a theological response to any innovation and instability of reality which is portrayed by science, as well as a strategy of its dialogue with theology. God is present in things, but we can see this only through the operation of the Spirit (167) who literally abides in us, becoming another soul within us and integrating us into the life of God (169). In this sense the very scientific vision of the world, treated through patristic eyes as the implanted wisdom of God in creation, likewise becomes possible only as a result of the operation of the Spirit. This gives another dimension to the anthropocentrism of patristic conceptions of the cosmos: it is the Holy Spirit that effectively gives to humankind the power to interpret the world: “scientific ideas are human ideas, and no dislodging of humankind from physical centrality in the universe affects that fundamental perception” (174). The role of the Holy Spirit in creation and re-creation is exactly to grant humanity the power of disclosing the sense of the created universe and relating it to God.

In conclusion, one can assert that the issue of the Spirit creates a predication for the dialogue between theology and science, for it requires an explicit theological commitment to be in place within such a dialogue. This makes the whole enterprise rather asymmetric, demonstrating indirectly that the very possibility of the dialogue is specifically inherent in that propensity of humanity which elevates it beyond nature, or which is effectuated by the Spirit of God. The difference in views on the Spirit between Western and Eastern Christianity—which is claimed in the title of this book—was explicated only through the reference to Patristic theology (unfortunately papers written by other modern Orthodox thinkers hardly represent any theological advance;