
One of the most profound problems in the history of Western thought is charting out exactly how we ended up with our scientific rationality. This relatively innocuous historiographic pursuit quite often raises innumerable hackles, gives rise to acrimonious debates and serves as boundary markers not only for positions, but also for whole disciplines. We have the end result, and we just can't quite figure out the causal chain of events behind it. Usually the causes we conjure up post hoc are shamelessly ethnocentric, triumphalistic and naive. Whether the causes are claimed to have their foundation in the so-called “Greek miracle” or the Protestant ethic or secularization or the Enlightenment, depends entirely upon the particular persuasion of the author. Non-Western cultures, and especially indigenous cultures, have keenly felt the humiliation and pain caused on others by such self-vindicating exercises in the history of scientific rationality. Understanding the relationships between science, the scientific mind and religion can be a key to understanding not only our history but also current world affairs.

The book under review proclaims on its back cover to be “a comprehensive guided tour into the succession of ways human beings have constructed order and meaning about the world, and their place in it.” Thus, the main theme of the book is a kind of cultural evolution of meaning-making. It is divided into 12 chapters: after the introductory chapter, chapters 2 and 3 describe Sumerian and Egyptian cosmologies and worldviews. Chapter 4 takes on the Presocratics, chapters 6 and 7 early and Medieval Christendom with brief subchapters on Islamic and Jewish thought, and, after a chapter (chap. 8) on the ‘triumphant’ rise of Western science, the next three chapters (chaps. 9–11) discuss various aspects of scientific cosmology. The book ends with a brief conclusion (chap. 12).

Looking through the bibliography, it becomes clear that the author’s strength resides in the natural sciences. Being an Associate Professor of Physiology and Pharmacology at James Cook University, Townsville, Australia, this is hardly surprising. He is a cardiac specialist. The bibliography lists an interesting collection of books on the history and philosophy of science, whereas the books on religion, even though there are recent titles, especially on Sumeria and Egypt, are outdated. There is not a trace of literature on the theoretical and methodological debates and advances that have been going on in the comparative study of religion for the last twenty years or so. I am generally tolerant of colleagues from outside our field, mainly because I have met...
gracious encouragement from colleagues whose disciplines I have trespassed on. In fact, trespassing is what we need in all the sciences, especially between the humanities (including the social sciences) and the natural sciences. This is because many new insights come from cross-fertilization. A good example in the study of religion is the recent interest in cognitive studies. The rise of hybrid disciplines like the cognitive science of religion is extremely important not only for our own field but also for the general public. But it would be arrogant to practice the cognitive science of religion without doing the hard work of learning from contemporary neuroscientists and experimental psychologists. We can only hope that our colleagues outside of our field will soon start reading contemporary scholars of religion rather than (just) Eliade, Smart and Campbell.

There is not much that is new for students of religion in the first seven chapters or so. They are, however, well written and informative, and I am sure that they contain information that the general reader would find interesting. The chapters are illustrated with handy charts and drawings, which professional teachers of religion might find useful. The only chapters that lack such charts and drawings are the chapters on Christianity (chaps. 6–7). The first chapters on Sumerian and Egyptian beliefs not only contain descriptions of their cosmologies but also the archaeological evidence, for instance in the chapter on Sumeria, concerning flood narratives (36–42). Dobson is particularly interested in the ‘scientific’ achievements of these early societies, e.g., their mathematical systems, astronomical systems, engineering achievements and medical ideas. These chapters end with the question “Why ‘natural’ science never appeared” in these locations. The answer, however, is foreseeable: because they lack a “conceptual formulation of more impersonalized relationships among the phenomena” (53, cf. 90, 218).

I found the chapters on the rise of natural science (chaps. 8–11) much more interesting. The chapters on the Presocratics (chap. 4) and on Classical Philosophy (chap. 5) concerning the beginnings of science, also belong to this category. They are written for readers who do not know the fascinating details about the rise of natural science, and the chapters are richly illustrated with helpful diagrams, tables and drawings. For those of us in need of refreshing our knowledge about Kepler’s three laws of motion, Isaac Newton’s four rules of reasoning or what exactly the Big Bang is all about, this book is delightful.

The title of the book is taken from Charles Darwin’s diary. In the 28 February 1832 page, Darwin wrote: “The mind is a chaos of delight, out of which a world of future & more quiet pleasure will arise.” What exactly Darwin meant by that is not discussed in the book, however, Dobson finds the “extraordinary diversity in mythopoeic, religious and scientific thought” (370) described in