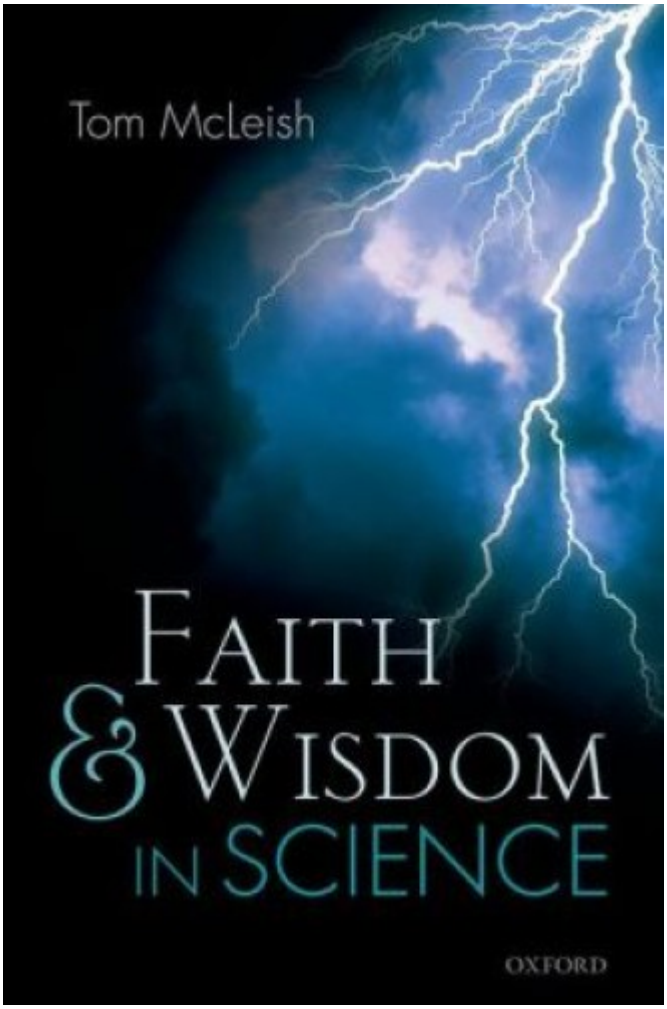
Faith and Wisdom in Science, by Tom McLeish

reviewed by J. B. Stump in the April 1, 2015 issue

In Review



Faith and Wisdom in Science

By Tom McLeish
Oxford University Press

In 1959, C. P. Snow delivered a lecture called “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution.” The two cultures are the humanities and the sciences, and Snow claimed that it is a cultural problem that few people are literate in both. By the end

of the 20th century, however, a new class of public intellectual had emerged, dubbed the “third culture” by John Brockman in his 1995 book of that title. These were top-shelf scientists, such as Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins, and Steven Pinker, who learned to communicate insights from their disciplines to the general public in ways that connected with the big existential questions about who we are and what our place in the universe is. With few exceptions these writers endorsed a naturalistic view of the world, according to which all the questions that matter can be answered by the sciences.

Other scientists recognized the limitations of science and did not pretend that it could answer all the questions we put to the universe. Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, and John Polkinghorne did not achieve the fame of the third-culture writers, but they created the academic discipline of science and theology. The next generation of scientists who have tried their hands at theology, whether professionally or more popularly, includes Alister McGrath, Celia Deane-Drummond, and Francis Collins.

What drives scientists to leave the laboratory and address the kinds of questions traditionally reserved for the humanities? This past summer I attended the annual meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation, the largest professional group of Christians in the sciences, and most of the presentations were theological or philosophical in nature. To be sure, they drew on the results and theories of the sciences, but primarily they aimed at interpreting scripture, examining presuppositions, or doing other kinds of philosophical work. Why would these scientists—most with no formal training in theology or philosophy—spend their research time and conference funds working outside their fields? To my mind, they are following the strategy of Augustine and Anselm: faith seeking understanding. They are committed Christians, and they are working out their faith in the context of modern science.

Another, not incompatible, answer to why scientists often turn to nonempirical questions is developed by Tom McLeish, a physics professor in the United Kingdom. In *Faith and Wisdom in Science*, McLeish argues for a deep commonality and kinship in the aims and motivations of science and of theology. They both draw deeply from the same wells: theology, not just science, engages with nature; and science, not just theology, pursues wisdom. Science was for a long time known as natural philosophy. *Philosophy*, the “love of wisdom,” was the appropriate word to describe the work of people like Robert Grosseteste, Robert Boyle, and even Gregory of Nyssa—Christians who saw nature as something more than a resource to be

subdued and manipulated for their own ends. These thinkers recognized that wisdom could be drawn from an understanding of nature.

Faith and Wisdom in Science is a different kind of science and religion book. This is partly because it comes from the United Kingdom, where the dialogue between the two cultures has a different tone. On the U.S. side of the Atlantic, the intersection of science and religion is typically understood as a war: Genesis, Galileo, and genetics are used as clubs to beat opponents into submission. Over there the tendency is to let science and religion do their own things. In that context, McLeish properly argues that theology and science need to be brought into more constructive dialogue. To this end, he encourages us to change the connecting word for the two disciplines from *and* to *of*, pointing us toward a theology *of* science and toward a middle ground where theology and science are neither competing with nor irrelevant to each other.

McLeish also contributes to what might be called a “turn to Job” and away from Genesis. Job is proving to be useful for biblical engagement with science, perhaps because its passages are less prone to be read as propositional claims and treated as scientific statements. McLeish and others see in the author of Job acute powers of observation of nature and an attitude of wonder that resonates with the scientific process. In fact, McLeish claims that the enterprise of science today stands in continuity with the biblical story going all the way back to these oldest meditations on creation.

It is not just because of its pedigree that science can be seen as a theological vocation. McLeish argues that Christianity is primarily about reconciliation—between God and humans, yes, but also between humanity and nature. The biblical witness regularly juxtaposes the subjects of nature and suffering, but the good news is that suffering is not the intended or permanent condition. Contends McLeish: “When we do science, we participate in the healing work of the creator. When we understand a little more of nature, we take a step further in the reconciliation of a broken relationship.” This sounds like scientists may be priests for our culture. Yes! says McLeish. But because of the Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers, so is everyone else:

> Scientists do indeed constitute, in this sense, a priesthood, but with no different status from the priesthood of factory workers, chefs, teachers, builders or carers. They simply have a special domain of healing and nurturing work to do, and this is on behalf of the rest of the community to whom they are accountable.

Worship and praise of the Creator is a proper human response to the natural world. It is also a proper and holy response for humans to examine nature closely and systematically. McLeish has provided some good, helpful, holistic thinking by a scientist about the place of science in our culture and in the church.

Scientists don’t have a monopoly on truth; nor should they be given an elevated and privileged role. But they can help us to see the natural world aright and participate in reimaging the natural world as God’s good creation. We’d all benefit from adopting the scientist’s attitude of wonder, which allows us to find wisdom wherever we look carefully enough.