

Last things

by [Gregory S. Cootsona](#) in the [April 4, 2001](#) issue

*The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*,  
edited by John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker

Popular media--and certain theologians--too often characterize theology and religion as being at war, with an occasional DMZ between science and its "facts" on the one side, and religion and its "feelings" on the other. Such caricatures ignore the way modern science has been nurtured by Christian doctrines and the practice of Christian scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo and Maxwell. They seem unaware that 20th-century developments in quantum mechanics have opened some scientists to theological discussions.

Michael Welker and John Polkinghorne are particularly able to guide theology and science at a new frontier: eschatology. Welker, a theologian at Heidelberg, has a remarkable ability to integrate theology with other disciplines such as sociology and media studies. Polkinghorne, an ordained Anglican priest, has built on an international reputation as professor of mathematical physics at Cambridge.

Their elegant collection of essays explores the subject of the world's end from the perspectives of physics, brain research, psychology, biblical studies, systematic theology and philosophy. Contributors include such scholars as Walter Brueggemann, Detlef Linke, Jürgen Moltmann, William Schweiker, Janet Martin Soskice, Kathryn Tanner, Miroslav Volf and Hans Weder. All participated in a multiyear consultation under the auspices of the Center of Theological Inquiry, and publicly presented their findings at Princeton University in March 2000.

Welker and Polkinghorne present a guiding motif of continuity/discontinuity in the introduction. For example, eschatology speaks of a resurrected body (continuity), but simultaneously asserts that "flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom." Broadly speaking, continuity allows for a substantive interchange between the fields and discontinuity for original theological contributions.

The book focuses on the natural sciences, the cultural sciences and ethics, the biblical traditions, theology and spirituality. Polkinghorne's compact essay

masterfully introduces the basic scientific issues related to the Christian doctrines about the last things. Concluding that "an unaided scientific account of the world does not succeed in making complete sense of cosmic history," he sketches the need for a theological understanding of reality.

The book's most outstanding essay is Soskice's demonstration of how the death of the Enlightenment "man" resonates in our postmodern age as the death of hope. She suggests that the contemporary problem is not the impressive knowledge of science (à la Lyotard), but "anthropological and as such a crisis of hope."

The section of the book devoted to the biblical traditions shows excellent biblical scholarship but little interaction with science. Donald Juel states that he respects scientists who find "their probings and discoveries theologically ambiguous at best . . . What the Christian tradition has to offer is not an easy word but the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ."

Writing about the resurrection of Jesus and eternal life, Welker uses Jan Assmann's idea of "cultural memory" to create his own category of "canonical memory." The concept is suggestive but needs more elaboration than a short essay allows. Canonical memory is an important "dimension of faith and of the workings of the Spirit." It is by the Spirit and by faith that the pivotal doctrine of Christ's resurrection "does not sink to a merely historical remembrance" and that "the incarnated Christ is present in a way that allows witnesses to gain a share in this life."

Eschatology, the least "grounded" of doctrines, represents for many little more than a pious wish. Therefore, the authors of this volume face a formidable task. They certainly present fresh insights. That their essays do not fully exhaust the subject merely indicates the size of the challenge.