Rescuing faith from scientific imperialism

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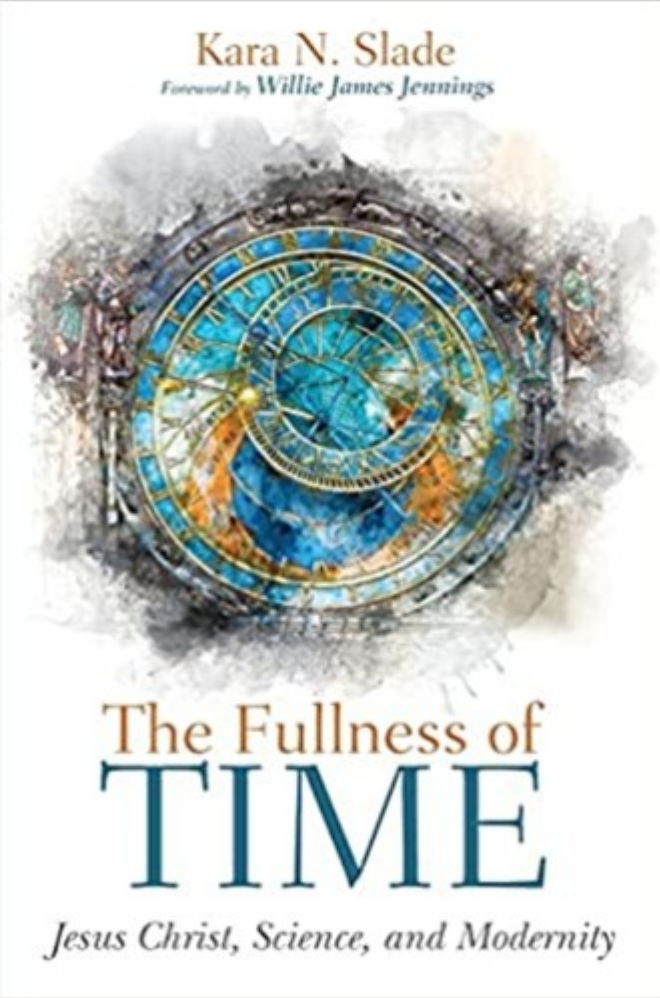
by J. Scott Jackson in the February 23, 2022 issue

In Review



The Fullness of Time

Jesus Christ, Science, and Modernity

by Kara N. Slade
Cascade
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Could an enlightened humanity steer the evolution of society, or is history locked into fixed cycles of ascent and decline? According to theologian Kara Slade, the gospel of Jesus Christ exposes both the blithe optimism of a progressive intellectual would-be elite and the dark pessimism of the resurgent alt-right. Both, she believes, stem from a common modern ideological distortion that valorizes the strong and discards real human lives into history's dustbin.

This scathing yet incisive volume abounds with examples of modern hubris, ranging from the lionization of Isaac Newton to recent proposals from E. O. Wilson and Charles Murray—supposedly grounded in evolutionary biology, genetics, and neuroscience—advocating eugenics and population control. Reactionaries like William Strauss and Neil Howe, who have inspired former White House adviser Stephen K. Bannon, augur a "fourth turning" of social turmoil, in which the weak and marginal must be sacrificed for an ostensible greater good. Progressive thinker David Christian advocates revamping pedagogy to read the meaning of existence within the sweeping "big history" of cosmic and terrestrial evolution.

According to Slade, such prognosticators share a common agonistic, graceless, and oppressive view of natural and human history, one that insidiously has abetted racial and colonial oppression. To make her case, Slade—a former NASA engineer who now serves as associate rector of Trinity Church in Princeton and as canon theologian in the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey—rehearses the genealogy of the reified figure whom critical race theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva labels "scientific man" (*Homo scientificus*).

Since the 18th century, Western gains in the sciences have been accompanied by idealized, herculean portraits of the scientific elite, who have been received across much of the broader culture as the priests of enlightenment. Along with this trend, thinkers from Hegel to Darwin to their respective disciples have sought to map human progress in an ascending evolutionary curve that privileges Whiteness and castigates ostensibly weak, culturally backward individuals and groups. An epistemological quest for knowledge thus has abetted ethical and political projects of oppression and control.

According to Slade, Christian theologians should know better than to be duped by grandiose claims that distort and abuse the modern sciences. Still, too many thinkers, in her view, continue to recapitulate the unfruitful, defensive postures toward empirical research that both liberal and conservative religious thinkers staked out during the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the previous century. Though the empirical reality of biological evolution may be a given today, theologians need not let scientific theory dictate the scope of revelation.

Christian efforts to rewrite doctrine by conflating ostensibly evolutionary progress with divine providence, Slade claims, have been most unhelpful, even positively harmful. An undue obsession with humankind's material origins has gone hand in hand with an immanent eschatology, with disastrous consequences for Christian witness and practical ethics. In her reading, 20th-century luminaries like Social Gospel pioneer Walter Rauschenbusch and Jesuit geologist-philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin appropriated the logic of evolution to distinguish the vanguard of progress in the technological, cultural, and political development in the modern West. Ostensible cultural advance, like biological natural selection, thus sorts out winners from losers.

Slade argues, rather trenchantly, that more recent thinkers engaging in dialogues between theology (or, more abstractly, "religion") and the natural sciences have failed, by and large, to wrestle with the materialism and racist implications of much evolutionary thought. For example, she claims that such progressive Christian thinkers as Ted Peters and John Haught have uncritically appropriated modernist assumptions and concerns into their constructive theologies. Disappointingly, Slade engages these thinkers too briefly and summarily to sustain her critique. Her provocative challenge to an entire subdiscipline of contemporary theology cries out for a more thorough, systematic, and fair presentation.

More promisingly, Slade opts not so much to refute theologians of evolution point by point as to forge a different path: one rooted in the christologically centered arc of the liturgical year, the practices of baptism and Eucharist, and the art of loving neighbors in their concrete particularity. With a backward glance at the smug imperialist legacy that has bedeviled much of her Anglican heritage, Slade culls insights from the dialectical theologians Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, who, in her reading, resisted the totalizing encroachments of modern thought without becoming reactionaries.

The constructive alternative to the hubris of scientific man, she contends, is a vigorously confessional focus on the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the fulcrum of human history, rather than on the primordial origins or Promethean exploits of *Homo sapiens*. “In short, the unrepeatable, once-for-all nature of cross and resurrection introduces a direction into time, but not as a trajectory of progress,” she writes. “Instead, it means Christ cannot be collapsed into an example of a more generalized cyclical concept of time.”

Kierkegaard, in Slade’s reading, recovers the concrete act of faith by which individuals appropriate Christ’s saving death, the reality from which works of love flow. Barth emphasizes Christ, who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8), as the Lord of time, whose victory over death frees human beings to live in the world shorn of the obsessive desire to control human destiny and history.

Such a faith, Slade proposes, can help us reclaim our view of time both from the delusion that we can control it and from the debilitating fear that our species and planet may be running out of it. By marking the mystery of Christ in the seasons of Advent through Pentecost, she hopes, we might learn to trust in a loving and saving God, even if fallible human beings cannot fathom the mysteries of providence.