

Review of *Science and Humanity: a Humane Philosophy of Science and Religion* by Andrew Steane (OUP, 2018)

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This is a remarkable book. It is what the sub-title claims, a *humane* vision for how human life might be understood, one that goes about its arguments in a *philosophical* way. The author is an eminent physicist, professor at Oxford, co-discoverer of quantum error correction. The book is very clearly, lucidly, and persuasively written. Interestingly, too, Steane uses poems of his at the end of chapters, and offers occasional spiritual exercises.

This is all part of his central thesis in much of the book, which is that themes such as poetry explores, and which are central to religion, such as non-violence, justice, mercy, and love, are as real as the quantum world. Many of the opening chapters are concerned to refute, philosophically, the notion that understanding the universe at its smallest gives us our best or only understanding of how the world works. Steane's point that higher-level descriptions, in particular symmetry, energy and entropy, are just as determinative of the character of physical reality as quantum wave-equations, is interesting and tellingly made. He then proceeds to rebut, in an analogous way, Dawkins' emphasis on the selfish gene. Fair enough, but rather well-trodden ground.

Steane's real agenda, however, is not so much these anti-reductionist moves but a defence of the plausibility of theism – that there is that about reality which merits both personal language and ultimate allegiance. And theology begins to creep in here – as in Steane's conviction that material reality is 'sound' (translating *tôv* from Gen. 1, normally translated 'good'), and that it is extremely unlikely that 'the world was once comfortable and easy until human beings came along and spoiled it' (p.102). I strongly agree with both these positions, though I am less convinced that 'The dinosaurs will not mind having had to die, if we will but sing of them.' (p.112)

Steane makes a good case that science cannot answer questions of value and ultimate meaning. At Chapter 10 he introduces the sort of religion he approves of – a spirituality willing to do serious intellectual work, but also to respond personally, in trust and curiosity, to 'the real foundation and enarching shaper of all things' (p.123) He shows that the existence of this 'shaper' (at this point he still holds back from God-language) is not susceptible of proof.

In the chapter on religious language Steane notes that religion is difficult – hence it involves odd ways of speaking and behaving, and strange assertions about patently imperfect books. We are not here to try and please the divine but rather 'to be part of the expression of generous self-forgetful goodness that the universe falteringly expresses' (p.160). The Hebrew Scriptures he describes as 'the record of a lengthy struggle to understand justice more fully' (p.165). Steane goes on to write, 'Some of us think Jesus was raised from death, because that is what was and is experienced, but we know he might not

have been, and we also know that we are not quite sure we know what we are talking about when we say that he was.' (p.212) Up to this point, the reader might feel that she was being invited to subscribe to an ahistoricised existential and ethical theism, beautifully expressed, but unfamiliar as Christianity. Steane agrees that only the personal character of the 'giver' distinguishes his creed from insights from Buddhism. 'None of the religious traditions have been uniformly generous or wise; all the major ones have some value to offer.' (p.248)

So it is perhaps a surprise that in the last fifteen pages more claims are made for historical Christianity, for its record in championing the poor, for its part in ending apartheid, and underlying these, Jesus' mode of working, from a position of weakness not power. A still greater surprise is the appeal to the Resurrection as 'sufficient evidence that reality extends beyond the ordinary processes of the natural world' (p.265). This seems in tension with the whole previous thrust of the book, that it is *through* careful attention to this ambiguous world, and human history which is 'not a sequence of miracles, but a muddled and vibrant complex of passions and pain' (p.265) that the self-giving giver may be sought and responded to. A whole hornet's nest of issues about divine action are raised in these last few pages, and not resolved.

There is much appeal to beauty in this text, and it is in its own way a beautiful book. I warmly recommend readers of *Modern Believing* to take the journey Steane invites us on, and form their own judgements as to its destination.