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Review: 'Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue'

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Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue. By John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001. viii + 151 pages. \$16.00 (paper).

Faith in the Living God is an extended conversation between Cambridge particle physicist turned Anglican theologian, John Polkinghorne, and German educated systematic theologian, Michael Welker. The book invites “troubled friends and educated despisers of Christianity” to eavesdrop while the authors do some “serious theological thinking about the living God” (132, 139). The fact that the authors already hold huge tracts of conceptual ground in common (e.g., both are unabashed and robust Trinitarians) does not dampen their optimism that the synergy they achieve, as *Christian* scientist speaks with *Christian* theologian, can be reproduced for the nonbelieving scientist whose face is pressed against the window.

The book opens with autobiographical sketches of the authors’ respective backgrounds in order to acclimate the eavesdropper to this family discussion. Part I is constructed of six chapters in which each author offers an essay on faith in God, faith in Christ, and faith in the Holy Spirit. Each essay is followed by a response from the interlocutor and a reply by the essay’s author. The content as well as the tenor of their conversation demystifies theological belief for the scientist. For example, Polkinghorne insists that theology is no more scandalous than science in being driven “to conclusions as initially strange and counterintuitive as those forced upon the pioneers of quantum theory” (46). Thus, the dual nature of light lends some epistemic permission to the theological claim that Christ must be properly understood under the dual aspect of humanity and divinity (46–48). Similarly, scientific confidence in the existence of entangled quantum states (as per the EPR [Einstein Podolski Rosen] effect—a baffling phenomenon indeed!) lends at least some plausibility to the mystical union believers are said to share within the body of Christ (53).

But this book is no carnival sideshow of cheap evidentialist tricks. In Part II, the authors re-imagine “Faith Seeking Understanding” by skillfully employing modes of postmodern philosophy. Polkinghorne’s critical realism includes a tendency toward epistemological holism that schools him to peer at Reality through *multiple* windows but to do so as one cognizant of the fact that he is *personally engaged* with the search (echoes of Michael Polanyi) and from *within* a concrete tradition, for there is no neutral standpoint (43). Similarly, Welker steers readers wide of those “cultural traps”—such as the illusion that successful dialogue requires speaking at the level of meta-discourse or agreeing to some form of pragmatic minimalism—that have historically undermined the fruitfulness of conversation between scientist and theologian.

Frankly, the density of the theological work done here is often too difficult for consumption by all but the brightest undergraduates. Yet the breadth of the territory covered in so few pages makes the text a sure winner for graduate courses in science and theology and a promising springboard for graduate and seminary classroom discussions on doctrinal topics and philosophical theology.