

Frankenberry, Nancy K. *The faith of scientists in their own words*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2008. ISBN 978-0-691-13487-1. Cloth. Bibliographic references and index. Pages vii-xviii, 542. US \$29.95 / £20.95. e-Book | 2009 | \$29.95 | ISBN: 978-1-4008-2980-4. Bookreview by Jitse M. van der Meer.

## DESCRIPTION

This volume belongs in a new genre of publication about religion and science. Books in this genre describe the religious faith of past and living scientists. What used to be considered private or sometimes confined to popular writings has become public over the last decade or so. The book is an anthology of selected writings of twenty one practicing scientists about their religious faith. Commentary by the editor provides context.

The first eight chapters cover the ‘founders of modern science’ from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-twentieth century including Galilei, Kepler, Bacon, Pascal, Newton, Darwin, Einstein and Whitehead. The second set of thirteen chapters feature scientists from the twentieth century to the present covering Carson, Sagan, Gould, Dawkins, Goodall, Weinberg, Polkinghorne, Dyson, Hawking, Davies, Wilson, Kauffman and Goodenough.

The introduction explains the main features of the book. It is aimed at the general public including nonspecialists, students and seekers (viii). This is why the editor has included only working scientists of major historic stature or contemporary public interest who had written about their faith in its relation to their science. Her stated focus on individuals facilitates access to the personal and historical context in which they lived and worked and avoids the distortions that arise when the issues are framed in terms of the abstractions of ‘religion’ and ‘science.’

Since it is impossible to review each of the twenty one chapters let me highlight two representative examples of how Frankenberry stimulates further reading. On Kepler: “A Lutheran, Kepler disagreed with Lutheran orthodoxy and made concessions to both Catholics and Calvinists. On the matter of Communion, Catholics believed that ‘transubstantiation’ physically transformed the wafer and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Lutherans explained that ‘consubstantiation’ occurred: Christ’s real body and blood were present even though the bread and wine looked unchanged, because, as divine, Christ’s body and blood become ‘ubiquitous’ and everywhere present. Calvinists held that the bread and wine remained mere bread and wine but provided true communion with Christ, who is in heaven with the Father. Kepler got into trouble for not embracing the ‘ubiquity’ doctrine of his fellow Lutherans.” (38). On Einstein: “How was Einstein’s determinism compatible with his well-known devotion to justice, humanitarian ideals, and social responsibility, all of which presume at least some degree of free will and indeterminism in the universe? It is far from clear how Einstein reconciled his espousal of determinism with his social and ethical principles.” (147).

The project left Frankenberry with two impressions. First, scientists associated with the scientific revolution were able to interrelate their Christian faith and their scientific discovery seamlessly, but “pockets of perplexity, elements of eccentricity, and unconventional forms within conventional Christian faith stand out.” (ix). Secondly, “in contrast to the historical titans, many of the contemporary scientists [ ] are moved by fresh visions and alternative forms of

spirituality.” (x)

## EVALUATION

As a popular-level introduction, this book admirably fills a gap between scholarly anthologies such as Rupke, N. A. (Ed.) *Eminent lives in twentieth-century science and religion*. Revised and expanded. Frankfurt: Peter Lang Verlag. 2009 and book-length biographies. Frankenberry sets a high standard. Generally, her commentaries succeed in capturing succinctly the excitement of exploring nature in the context of ‘faith’ and in introducing the perplexities that can emerge in the process. Nancy Frankenberry teaches religion at Dartmouth College and this shows in the quality of the commentary as in the thoughtful way she captures the complexity of Pascal’s reflections on faith and reason, explains the three versions of Pascal’s wager and corrects his caricature as an irrational fideist. There is an occasional flaw as, for instance, in the passage about Kepler and Communion cited above. It is true that for Calvinists the bread and wine remain mere bread and wine, but they do not provide true communion with Christ, who is in heaven with the Father. Rather, the bread and wine are visible reassurances of the spiritual presence of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit in the participants. On the side of the history of science the editor fails to point out that it was the impossibility of Jesus’s physical body to be in more than one place simultaneously, that kept Kepler from agreeing with the Lutheran view. On this point, Kepler’s physics affected the practice of his religious faith.

In her scholarly work Frankenberry defines religion as “a communal system of propositional attitudes and practices that are related to superhuman agents.” This definition would have excluded most contemporary scientists from her list as their religion is not related to superhuman agents. So in this book she has replaced it with “faith” which she takes in the broadest possible sense. Two advantages accrue. First, it captures views, attitudes and stances that function as a religion while not fitting in standard views of religion. This approach allows her to include the creative, the heterodox and even the antireligious views of scientists. For instance, this allows her to characterize the science of the sociobiologist E. O. Wilson as “akin to faith.” (437). Secondly, she avoids the controversies about definitions of religion in academia.

Only major historical figures or public intellectuals were included (viii). Their public status introduces the possibility that they were writing for the public and with ulterior motives rather than about their private beliefs. This is a historiographic concern that has entered the textbooks such as, for instance, Bowler, P. J. & Morus, I. R. *Making Modern Science*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 2005. The editor appears unaware that this raises the question of bias. So-called minor figures might have been more interesting for the lack of bias.

An extensive index and suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter make the book very accessible. Sometimes the reading list fails to include studies of importance to the theme of the book. For example, Mark Stoll: “Edward Osborne Wilson (b. 1929)” In: Rupke, N. A. (Ed.) *Eminent lives in twentieth-century science and religion*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang Verlag. 2000. Highly recommended for anyone who wants to scout what is on offer in science and religion studies or for students who need an essay topic.

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