This edited collection explores physico-theological works in Europe in the period 1650-1750. As the editors Ann Blair and Kaspar von Greyerz explain, the justification for putting the collection together is that “physico-theology,” though related, is not synonymous with “natural theology.” The distinction can be drawn for two reasons. First, physico-theology pertains to developments after 1650 while natural theology can be traced back to antiquity. Second, historical work to date often unhelpfully restricts work in both natural and physico-theology to arguments from design, which overlooks other approaches to the study of nature in service of theology. More carefully distinguishing physico-theology and natural theology is one way to remedy this unhelpful myopia. The volume is also therefore particularly interested in exploring and explaining what makes physico-theology different from natural theology.

The collection consists of an introduction to the volume followed by sixteen self-contained contributions from sixteen different authors with various disciplinary affiliations, including science and religion, history of science, Renaissance history, philosophy, language and literature, and English. The essays are organized into five sections that correspond roughly to 1) treatments that deal with the definition and scope of physico-theology, 2) case studies of national (European) contexts, 3) the impact of denominational differences between physico-theological authors, 4) the kinds of scientific developments these authors engaged with, and 5) the aesthetic sensibilities found within physico-theological work.

The most significant hurdle that the authors face is justifying the distinction between physico-theology and natural theology as an organizational principle for an edited volume. Indeed, as several of the authors (including the editors) clarify, “physico-theology” as an intellectual project defies easy definition, making it difficult to draw hard boundaries that might separate it from the genre of natural theology. Still, the editors distill the main characteristics of physico-theological work as that which assumes a rational benevolent God, takes a utilitarian approach to nature, adopts a particular vocabulary, contains polemics against the perceived threat of both deism and atheism, and generally displays an interest in personal witnessing and experience (pp. 7-8). The last two of these characteristics are particularly recognizable in other work more generally classified as natural theology. Despite these problems of slippages between definitions, the clearly delineated
timeline (1650-1750) is helpful for ensuring some coherence among the essays, and the organization of an in-person conference while putting the volume together has allowed the authors to speak to one another’s work in useful ways, including instances where there are disagreements.

The contributions vary greatly in both style and approach. Thanks to this heterogeneity, someone looking for a more or less continuous narrative of the emergence and progression of physico-theology as an intellectual movement in early modern Europe would have to work quite hard to reconstruct it. Conversely, as individual contributions the essays are concise, well contained, and well worth consulting, particularly for researchers interested in examples of how scientific developments in this period shaped notions of providence and the image of God, or in finding examples of the interaction between science and religion beyond the argument from design.

The variety between the contributions of the volume is also arguably its greatest strength. The approaches taken in the collection range from histories that explore the role of physico-theology in disciplinary formation, bibliographic explorations of bodies of physico-theological works, examinations of the works of specific physico-theologians (Willem Goeree, John Ray, Abbé Pluche, and Jakob Horst, to name a few) and literary analyses that examine the basic structures of physico-theological thought and writing. All the chapters are rigorously researched and refer to a variety of primary and secondary sources, both in their original languages and in translation.

As a sociologist of science currently exploring more recent developments in science-engaged theology, I frequently rely on historical narratives that aim to complicate the persistent simplifying thesis that “science” and “religion” are, and have historically been, necessarily in conflict. Careful historical work that shows how the relationship between “science” and “theology” was conceived when contemporary notions of “science” began to form is a crucial component in that effort. Many of the histories I tend to draw from are single-author works that take a particular disciplinary approach. The cross-disciplinary conversation of this volume (reflected in both contributors and content) is a refreshing departure.

The collection is particularly useful for its ability to show how physico-theology was as much about advancing “the new science,” and persuading readers of the virtues of these new ways of exploring the natural world, as it was an exercise in religious apologetics, providing proofs of the existence of God. Martine Pécharman, for example, makes this point clearly in her careful examination of Pascal’s objections to doing natural theology for precisely this purpose, and the subsequent efforts of editors to soften his objections. These kinds of histories are an important source of material for contemporary studies on the relationship between science and religion, much of which is likewise a boundary-drawing exercise with radically shifted dynamics.

Relatedly, the essays provide good examples of the role that physico-theology played in the development of the sciences with which it was in conversation. For example, Brian Ogilvie argues convincingly that physico-theologians, based on the aphorism that God can be observed in the smallest parts of nature, contributed to the formation of entomology as a discipline. Historians and sociologists of science and religion will find the chapters interesting for the ways in which they collectively through careful reading parse out subtle differences in the approaches of individual physico-theologians, geographic regions, and Christian denominations. Kathleen Crowther’s careful examination of the works of Jakob Horst as exemplar of natural philosophy in the Lutheran context and Katherine Calloway’s close reading of seminal physico-theological works in the English context and their relationship to the main characteristics of physico-theology, are both excellent
case studies of how denominational differences impacted the science-religion space.

It will also be of interest to read about the role of physico-theology in developments of theology in early modern Europe, particularly how the emergence in this period of an emphasis on a benevolent God over a vengeful God is intertwined with an emphasis on an ordered universe and the notion of natural laws. Essays that explore the aesthetic sensibilities of physico-theology, such as Jonathan Sheehan’s exploration on the importance of form in physico-theology and Barbara Hunfeld’s discussion on the basic principles of physico-theological thought from a literary perspective, raise questions relevant today about the role of “the ugly” and “the messy” for understanding not just Creation itself, but “science as a gift from God,” a sentiment that is growing in contemporary work in science-engaged theology. It is helpful to read about what parts of the natural world these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century men found to be most conducive to theological enquiry, and to compare it with what kinds of science are deemed useful for theologians and church leaders to think with today.

The volume also draws out the way in which physico-theology was also understood as a more approachable route to belief in God, with physico-theologians (particularly those of Lutheran persuasion) seeing the physico-theological project as public theology, analogous to the project of translating the Latin Bible into the vernacular. Exploring the approaches taken by physico-theologians raises the question of the extent to which the way science has developed into increasingly esoteric specialization has made the natural world more or less “readable” for the lay public(s) in the way that many physico-theological thinkers (mostly) believed it to function.

Overall, the collection probably works better for those who have prior knowledge of early modern science and/or theology in Europe than it would for someone coming to the interplay between science and religion for the first time. That said, many of these short essays are informative and engaging, and would make for good case studies for anyone with an interest in the history of theology and science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or with a need for case studies in the history of the interaction between science and theology that go beyond the argument from design.
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