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Review

Peter Manley Scott,
Anti-Human Theology: Nature, Technology and the Postnatural
(London: SCM Press, 2010).

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The title of Peter Manley Scott's book certainly captured my attention. I cannot recall ever reading a theological treatise on why humans should, *per se*, be opposed to themselves. I soon, discovered, however, that it is the subtitle that offers a more accurate description. The book is a theological attempt to come to some provisional understanding of what being human means within the present circumstances of late modernity. And as such it reveals, with great acuity, the

wondrous possibilities and baffling perplexities that late moderns must encounter and cannot evade.

Scott contends that “nature” has three possible meanings: 1) as other than human; 2) as inclusive of human; and 3) as the essence of a thing. None of these meanings is satisfactory because the idea that nature is a given or objective order is deeply problematic to political, or perhaps more accurately, most late modern accounts of political theology. This is particularly the case in respect to technology as the principal tool, both practically and conceptually, for shaping and enacting late modern politics. Yet if nature is a given order, then technology is used to either conform human behavior accordingly or to assert human mastery over nature, resulting in destructive consequences in either instance.

Alternatively, Scott insists that to be postnatural entails the recognition that the “human is mixed up with nature and nature mixed up with the human” (p. 4). This mixture, he suggests, has probably always been the case, but what is unique to late modern political theology is the explicit recognition and admission. There is, in short, no nature that is antecedent to the human. The postnatural, then, is a political category because the natural enjoys the same status. Both are constructs that suggest sharply differing sources and contexts of order. The postnatural accurately names the present political circumstances, and that naming in turn helps define how theology should be pursued. More importantly the fading distinction between the natural which the postnatural identifies is both theologically and politically liberating, and the book consists of a four part argument to demonstrate why this is the case.

In Part One, Scott situates the postnatural within theological and political discourse. He initiates this task by examining Bonhoeffer’s account of the relation between freedom and order in creation. For Bonhoeffer, freedom is the principal sign of the *imago dei*. In bearing this sign, humans are simultaneously free to be for other humans, and free from the non-human. This freedom *for* and *from* is instantiated in the creational mandates which are protected from being naturalized since they are commanded by Christ. The mandates, therefore, are activities rather than structures, and such mandated action situates humans to represent non-human nature, implying in turn that both should be “understood as *citizens* in a common realm” (p. 34,

emphasis original). Any inflexible separation between humanity and nature, then, cannot be sustained since both are socially constructed; artifacts interacting within a common environment. Consequently, the resulting “postnatural order is neither given nor can it be overcome” (p. 39), calling into question the very notion of technological mastery since there is no objective nature to be mastered. In short, any concept of nature reflects prior concepts of social and political associations.

In Part Two Scott sets forth the principal themes underlying his anti-human theology, namely, incarnation and resurrection. The incarnation suggests that humans have been authorized by God to represent the creaturely realm. To be anti-human, then, entails in turn a self-understanding of being co-participant and representative of the non-human. Drawing heavily upon Arendt’s principle of natality, such participation and representation requires honoring the web of life in which the human and non-human are both enmeshed. Natality orients this honoring toward new and renewing possibilities; the invariable quality of the natural is displaced by the dynamism and fluidity of the postnatural. Consequently, deconstructing the human results in discovering the genuinely human, and resurrection is ultimately the affirmation of natality.

Part Three investigates technology in the postnatural condition. Technology is often developed and deployed to overcome the constraints of time and place, as well as enhancing personal longevity and performance. These attempts, however, presuppose a fundamental distinction between the human and non-human that theologians, more often than not, fail to challenge or adequately criticize. This failure skews subsequent theological inquiry and assessment as exemplified in an unwarranted pessimism or optimism regarding the efficacy of so-called attempts at mastering nature and human nature. Rather, technology should be assessed in terms of the postnatural condition in which it would be recognized that technological development is neither entirely good nor evil, but is always ambiguous.

Part Four consists of a brief exploration into what living in the postnatural might or should be like. Scott conducts his expedition by examining and assessing the issues of GM crops in the UK, and recycling in urban ecologies. In these brief essays some of the principal theological themes developed in the preceding chapters are brought together in respect to policy

and practice. The principal issue at stake is not to assess whether the “artifacts” of GM crops or cities either harm or enrich the “natural” human condition. Rather, the critical task at hand is to expose the inadequacy of the prior social and political constructs which shape our understanding of what constitutes and differentiates the artificial and natural. And the subsequent constructive theological task is to deconstruct and reshape new categories that are more apropos to the postnatural condition. It is in pursuing these critical and constructive tasks that the book offers a substantive contribution to political theology, and one, it should be added, that is intensely green.

The chief value of *Anti-Human Theology* is that it offers some insight into the perplexity and ambiguity of the present circumstances of late modernity, particularity since it is far from clear what is replacing it. In many respects, the book reads like a series of reports on brief excursions into a largely unknown and uncharted territory. Like all such reports they are concise and provisional, but they invite other explorers to enter this terrain.