

## Book Review

Gijsbert van den Brink, Rik Peels, Bethany Sollereder (eds.), **Progress in Theology. Does the Queen of the Sciences Advance?** Routledge Science and Religion Series, London – New York: Routledge, 2024, 308 pp.

In 2024, as part of the *Routledge Science and Religion Series*, a volume entitled *Progress in Theology. Does the Queen of the Sciences Advance?* was published, edited by Gijsbert van den Brink (Professor of Theology and Science at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), Rik Peels (Professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, holding a University Research Chair in Analytic and Interdisciplinary Philosophy of Religion), and Bethany Sollereder (Lecturer in Science and Religion at the University of Edinburgh). This volume is written from multiple perspectives, featuring seventeen contributors diverse in terms of gender, career stage, geography, and Christian denomination.

The volume is dedicated to a thorough and multifaceted analysis of the possibility – or impossibility – of progress in theology. In particular, the authors explore a range of questions related to this topic: Can theology develop in a manner similar to other academic disciplines, and if so, in what areas and forms does this progress manifest? What positive outcomes might progress yield, and what challenges does it pose for theology? In which areas has progress been particularly evident in recent years? How can theology engage with other sciences and religious traditions for its own development? What achievements and challenges in other academic disciplines have prompted a reevaluation of theology, its reintegration into the university setting, and its openness to dialogue with culture, society, and various fields of knowledge?

Almost all the contributors agree that theological progress has occurred in the past, continues in the present, and brings numerous positive outcomes. If Christian theology aspires to develop and remain self-critical, contemporary, and relevant, it must take into account advancements in other fields of knowledge and engage in productive dialogue not only with them but also with other religious traditions.

This volume consists of four parts, each dedicated to a particular aspect of progress in theology. The first part, *Situating the Debate*, clarifies the concepts of “progress” and “theology” and examines their compatibility or common ground. Chapter 1 provides a general introduction to the volume. In

Chapter 2, René van Woudenberg argues that progress is context-dependent: what constitutes progress in one domain may signify regression in another. He emphasizes that scientific progress cannot be entirely free from values. In Chapter 3, Gijsbert van den Brink explores the possibilities for progress in theology, countering the New Atheists' claim that theology is static. He proposes five approaches to understanding theological progress, demonstrating the potential for the development of theological thought.

The second part, *Dimensions of Progress in Theology*, considers various types and levels of progress in theology, both within the discipline itself and in interdisciplinary and interreligious contexts (or what Gijsbert van den Brink refers to as "intra-paradigmatic progress" and "trans-paradigmatic progress"). In Chapter 4, Rik Peels responds to accusations of theological stagnation, pointing not only to epistemic but also to moral and religious dimensions of progress. He provides examples that illustrate the multifaceted development of theological thought. Chapter 5 offers a synchronic perspective on theological progress, developed from historical, theological, epistemological, and doctrinal angles. The essence of this perspective lies not in discovering new truths but in attaining a deeper understanding of those already revealed in the past. Next, in Chapter 6, Hans van Eyghen examines how the use of sources – Scripture, tradition, nature, religious experience – and the integration of interdisciplinary approaches can contribute to theological development. Chapter 7 applies the hermeneutics of testimony to the analysis of theological texts, demonstrating its significance for epistemic progress. In Chapter 8, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen explores comparative theology as a key element in the advancement of theology, emphasizing the importance of engagement and receptive dialogue with other religious traditions as "an act of hospitality, of giving and receiving gifts" (p. 128). In Chapter 9, Oskari Juurikkala draws on the ideas of Iain McGilchrist, arguing that significant theological breakthroughs occur through intuitive rather than merely discursive (analytical) approaches. Juurikkala acknowledges the value of left-hemisphere-related activities but asserts that substantial progress is only possible if theologians (as well as other scholars) also develop right-hemisphere-related skills.

The third part, *Case Studies Illustrating Progress*, presents examples of theological progress. Chapter 10 demonstrates how discussions on free will and divine foreknowledge evolved from Augustine through Boethius to Anselm, illustrating the possibility of conceptual progress in theology over time.

In Chapter 11, Ignacio Silva analyzes the Divine Action Project of the late 20th century and subsequent debates that emerged from it. He identifies epistemic progress in the divine action debate, which supports the claim that theological knowledge can advance. In Chapter 12, Marius Dorobantu examines the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on theological anthropology, particularly on the understanding of human nature and the *imago Dei*. He suggests that AI, much like the emergence of neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory, can act as a catalyst for progress in theological anthropology, prompting theologians to refine what *imago Dei* means and what makes it unique in light of AI's capabilities. Chapter 13 elaborates on progress in ecumenical theology and dialogues, analyzing two strategies – linguistic reductionism and theological equatism. The latter, being more contemporary, has proven more successful in fostering dialogue, as evidenced by the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, signed by Lutherans and Catholics in 1999. Chapter 14 warns against a linear view of progress, which often pertains more to change than actual advancement and may even lead to regression – for example, when modern agricultural practices deplete topsoil and contaminate water sources with nitrates, raising the question of whether higher crop yields should truly be considered progress (p. 220). The author seeks to highlight the crucial role of theology in shaping scientific progress and addressing climate change, emphasizing that theological narratives – particularly those related to the Garden of Eden – have historically influenced the motives and goals of scientific progress: exploiting such narratives in isolation from their religious contexts has contributed to ecological crises.

Finally, the concluding section, *The Future of Theology in Academia*, connects theological progress with its future within the academic sphere, examining its scholarly significance and defending its place in the university. Chapters 15–17 explore theology's role in academia and its contributions to society. Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruz compare theological and scientific methodologies, concluding that theology does not lag behind the sciences in applying rigorous epistemic standards, including the capacity for progress. They identify cognitive similarities in how theologians and scientists assess hypotheses. Katrin Gülden-le Maire analyzes external factors influencing theological discourse and arrives at a pessimistic outlook regarding the future of Protestant theology in continental Europe, particularly within the German academic context. Paul Macdonald underscores the significance of theology for higher education, arguing that it fosters the pursuit of

wisdom, which, according to him, “is the greatest epistemic and educative good” (p. 276).

Overall, this volume presents a comprehensive study of progress in theology, highlighting its complexity, multi-dimensionality, and its adaptability, dialogical nature, and openness to new ideas and traditions. Nearly all the contributors view theological progress as a positive and even necessary phenomenon.

However, the book does not sufficiently address intra-Christian concerns and objections to the concept of progress in theology, particularly the counterarguments from the Orthodox tradition (especially its fundamentalist wing). For Orthodoxy, questions about the (im)possibility of doctrinal and theological development hold fundamental significance.

As a Western publication, the book also fails to consider Orthodox discourse and its potential contribution to discussions on the future of theological anthropology in light of challenges related to AI (see Chapter 12). In my view, the Orthodox perspective on *imago Dei* offers a more adequate response to this challenge compared to the functional, relational, and eschatological approaches. Drawing on the anthropology of the Greek Church Fathers, Orthodox theology goes beyond Pannenberg’s eschatological framework, as it links the image of God to the infinite process of theosis and participation in the life of the Holy Trinity – something that can never be subject to AI. According to Orthodox teaching, the image of God in humans represents a divinely bestowed potential for continuous assimilation to God (theosis). Just as an acorn is meant to grow into a mighty oak, the ultimate telos of the *imago Dei* is participation in God’s being, wherein human nature is not lost but transfigured.

The absence of this perspective creates the impression that a significant part of the Christian heritage is ignored and left out of the discussion on theological progress. Finnish theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen proposes interreligious dialogue as a means of advancing theological thought. However, before moving in this direction, it is crucial to foster internal dialogue within the Christian tradition itself. Without taking into account the Eastern Christian perspective – let alone integrating or at least engaging with it – the study, like many others, remains incomplete.

Despite these limitations, the book is well-written, informative, and covers a broad spectrum of disciplines with which theology already interacts or could engage in dialogue. These include the behavioral and natural sciences,

philosophy, as well as theological reflection on the exact sciences and various contemporary theories. All of this affirms that theology remains a relevant and evolving discipline. The book certainly makes a significant contribution to discussions on the status and importance of theology in light of contemporary conditions, crises, challenges, and new opportunities emerging in science, education, society, and culture. It is informative, introduces readers to some of the latest developments in theology, and serves as a kind of apologetic against detractors, critics, or those with a low view of theology. The book will undoubtedly be of interest to theologians, particularly systematic theologians, as well as to anyone reflecting on the viability and significance of theology in the modern world – including its critics.

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