

# Modern Science and “the Blessed Hope”

John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, editors. *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 2000. ix + 309 pages.

John Polkinghorne. *The God of Hope and the End of the World*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002. xxv + 154 pages.

*Reviewed by David R. Larson*

Scripture anticipates a time when God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more: mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4 NRSV). Debates persist in many scientific circles, however, as to how—but not whether—the universe will perish. Will it expand and cool until everything dies? Or will it contract in a fiery crunch

that consumes all? “Freeze or fry?” is now the question, we are frequently told. Either way, the death of the universe is not what we Christians usually have in mind when we extol “the blessed hope.”

These books report on several conferences the Center for Theological Inquiry convened about these issues in the early 1990s at its headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey, and at Heidelberg, Germany. John Polkinghorne, a physicist and theologian at Cambridge University, and Michael Welker, a theologian at the University of Heidelberg, edited *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology*

*on Eschatology*. It contains eighteen essays presented at the conferences by scientists and theologians in approximately equal numbers, many with differing specialties and points of view. Authored by one person, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* presents John Polkinghorne’s own convictions in light of the exchanges at the conferences. Taken together, these books provide an excellent introduction to the breadth and depth of the current discussions.

The essays by Kathryn Tanner, at the University of Chicago, and Jørgen Moltmann, from the University of Tübingen, represent the wide range of views in the

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anthology. Moltmann’s more traditional article assesses a number of past and present answers to the question, “Is There Life After Death?” Tanner’s less traditional one on “Eschatology Without a Future?” explores what Christians might still affirm if they embrace the idea that the universe is headed for permanent destruction. The other essays fall at various points between these extremes.

Both in his essays within the anthology and in his own book, John Polkinghorne contends that the universe will perish but that its death will be followed by a new cosmic order that will be continuous with the present one in some ways and discontinuous with it in others. On the one hand, the temporality, relatedness, patterns of organized occurrences, and mathematical precision of the way things now are will continue, he believes. Even if they have died, human persons will live again, Polkinghorne also holds. God remembers the formal character of their lives and will re-embody these patterns at the

resurrection of the dead.

On the other hand, although those who live in the next cosmic epoch will be embodied as we are, the matter of which their bodies will be composed—like the “physical fabric” of the entire new creation—will be different. Among other things, the new order will no longer require a

a positive but noncoercive influence in each and every circumstance on an ongoing basis.

Polkinghorne’s position is marked by a methodological asymmetry that deserves further reflection. When he and other Christian theologians and scientists review the past, they rightly attempt to inte-

Adventist Christians. Because it is more accessible, it might be best to begin with John Polkinghorne’s book and then turn to the more technical essays in the volume he edited with Michael Welker. If we do our homework, and if we presume that others are as honest in their beliefs as we are in ours, we will be able to partici-

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predatory ecological order to support life. Neither will it require enough distance from God to make doubt a live option.

Although I find Polkinghorne’s proposals exceedingly helpful, I also believe there are several items that deserve further study and thought. Among these are Polkinghorne’s brief and surprising comments on behalf of the idea of purgatory. In addition to its lack of support from Scripture and science, this doctrine is unattractive to me because it implies that we humans cannot freely choose no longer to exist by wholly and permanently rejecting God’s love.

God’s continuous participation in the life of this universe and those that will follow it is a theme that deserves more emphasis than Polkinghorne gives it in these books, I believe. He attributes the ongoing flow of all things to the primordial potential God initially established, the patterns of regularity we used to call “laws of nature,” and the trials and errors of chance. As he probably expounds elsewhere, however, this explanation, which is so abbreviated that some might mistake it for deism, pays insufficient attention to the ways God is

grate their best interpretations of the evidence from Scripture with their best interpretations of the evidence from science. When they discuss the future, however, they appear more willing to allow their interpretations of the differing evidence from these two sources to coexist without being synthesized. Perhaps this is the best that we can do at this time; however, I believe that greater integration when discussing the future would be a good thing.

These books prompt interesting questions about the integrity of our beliefs. We have no moral right to believe things that are wholly contrary to our best interpretations of all the available evidence, scriptural and otherwise. Nevertheless, precisely because the future is that which has not yet happened, all of the evidence is not now available! We must therefore decide how to live our lives by reviewing the past and extrapolating from it and the present to the future. As Polkinghorne contends, when doing so there is nothing better for us to trace than the plentiful manifestations of God’s steadfast love.

Both of these books deserve to be studied and discussed, particularly by those of us who are Seventh-day

pate in these important conversations in positive ways. Doing so will help keep “the blessed hope” alive.

For additional material on the Internet by John Bladwin, Alan Padgett, Richard Rice, John Wong, and myself regarding the anthology edited by John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, please visit [www.ponderanew.com](http://www.ponderanew.com).

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