

*Divine Action and Modern Science*. By **Nicholas Saunders**. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xviii + 238 pp. \$60/£45 cloth; \$22/£16.95 paper.

Nicholas Saunders, of the Ian Ramsay Center at Oxford University, is a twenty-nine year old physicist, theologian, and barrister. He is also the author of one of the best books published on divine action in the context of modern scientific understandings of the world.

*Divine Action and Modern Science* is written clearly. Its author has a sound knowledge of the relevant physics (especially chaos theory and quantum mechanics), an appropriate grasp of important debates in the philosophy of science (especially concerning physical laws), and a sensitive appreciation of theological intricacies. Add to that his ability to analyze complex material without getting bogged down in peripheral details, and this is a book to recommend widely. Saunders offers no full-blown theory of his own but hopes that his critical work will serve to direct the debate, including perhaps his own future contributions to it, along fruitful lines.

Special divine action for Saunders means God acting intentionally at particular times and places. Saunders argues that the concept of special divine action is central to the Christian tradition and Christian spirituality, and that no existing theory of special divine action gives a satisfactory account if it. He concludes that the result for theology is something of a crisis.

In particular, Saunders takes on many of those involved during the 1990s in the Divine Action Project (sponsored by the Center for Theology and Natural Sciences and the Vatican Observatory). He discusses in detail Sir John Polkinghorne's hypothesis that chaos theory discloses a subtle and supple natural world despite its reliance on deterministic mathematical modeling. He analyzes Arthur Peacocke's theory of divine action through whole-part constraint on complex systems. He also discusses views of special divine action at or through the quantum realm, referring to William Pollard, as well as Nancey Murphy, Robert Russell, and Thomas Tracy. In each case, his discussion of the relevant science is accessible and he does not fail to point out the most feasible aspects of each author's contribution.

Saunders' most impressive negative conclusion is that all of these theories of special divine action break basic rules accepted by those who advance them. The rule broken most often is that God must act in non-interventionist ways, i.e. in accordance with the laws of nature, interpreted as ontological features of the world rather than merely as descriptions of natural regularities. While many theists have no problem with the idea of God acting through miracles, understood as violations of natural laws, the theologians Saunders examines don't like the idea of God first creating laws of nature and then inconsistently ignoring those laws to get special things done. So their failure to explain how God acts without violating laws of nature is a serious problem for them.

There are several limitations of this discussion of special divine action. Most importantly, Saunders works with a limited range of concepts of God, even relative to the Christian tradition. This matters because the problem of divine action has quite different elements when God is conceived in neo-Platonic or Aristotelian-Thomist ways, the very ways that were dominant in the period of the formation of Christian doctrine. For instance, the venerable doctrine of divine

aseity, which affirms God's changelessness, seems incompatible with Saunders' personalist idea of God. Saunders also seems not to realize how spiritually unsupportive his own view of God would have been and is still for many Christians of a more classical mindset. The idea of God changing in the ways necessary for the sorts of action Saunders defends (entertaining special intentions, or acting in special times and places) was more or less repugnant to many theological traditions influenced by Greek philosophy. The doctrine of divine aseity, by affirming God's changelessness, has a spiritual power and comfort that seems lost on Saunders. In the old terms of the Jerusalem versus Athens debate, Saunders sides with Jerusalem and dismisses Athens without explaining why.

Readers interested in miracles or classical ideas of God will not find much support in this book. People interested in non-interventionist theories of the way a personalist divine being acts in the world, however, definitely need to ponder Saunders' trenchant critique.

Wesley J. Wildman  
Boston University

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