

Book Review

Starting Science from God

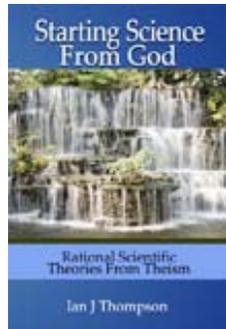
REVIEWED BY JIM LAWRENCE

Starting Science from God: Rational Scientific Theories from TheismIan J. Thompson
Eagle Pearl Press

To my knowledge there are only two Swedenborgian Ph.D. physicists alive who have worked as college professors: Gregory Baker, now retired from full-time teaching at Bryn Athyn College, and Ian Thompson (see end of article). Both have published a volume on physics with Cambridge University Press (Thompson's is titled *Nuclear Reactions in Astrophysics*, 2009), among dozens of other publications.

Scientists for the most part assume the universe arises from physical processes only and do not permit theoretical consideration of a proposed causal force lying outside of or beyond the physical universe itself. Seeking to open a fresh line of inquiry in the "science and theology conversation" into the basic questions of purpose (if any) and direction of the universe and of human life, Thompson has been developing a framework he calls theistic science. His approach explores models of physical science that emerge when one begins with postulates from theology, instead of with accumulated facts of science, and then sees how it correlates with natural science. To reductionists of all stripes but especially to that legion who are professional scientists, he offers this challenge: "A change needed is for science to give up assuming the causal closure of the universe" (p. 26).

In *Starting Science from God: Rational Scientific Theories from Theism*, Thompson invites his readers into an adventurous romp through historical theology, philosophy of nature, contemporary physics, and (Swedenbor-



gian) theosophy along the way toward an interpretation of modern physics that more than accommodates visionary spirituality. He creates a theological manifesto driven by a core postulate that proposes love as the fundamental substance and propensity of all that is. Since theology is primarily concerned with the nature of human life as it relates to God, Thompson also incorporates modern psychology as a critical element in a picture framing both

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modern science and good theology. *In nuce*, Thompson argues that from known properties of physical materials and their dispositions one can quite plausibly project a multi-level structure of reality held together by a divine love that involves a human consciousness contemplating questions of meaning and purpose and evolving upwardly into creative participation of that love. Of its six parts two are titled "A Scientific Theism" and "Theistic Science," which provides an indication of how the author angles into his subject from both sides.

Even though *Starting Science from God* often enters the abstractions basic both to philosophy of nature and of God, the book is written in a clear and comprehensible style. In its 300 pages one encounters dozens of important thinkers from Plato and Aristotle

to such modern titans as Alfred North Whitehead, Roger Penrose, and Nicholas Saunders. Swedenborg is represented explicitly in several places by direct reference, but implicitly the Swedish theosopher is everywhere and undergirds Thompson's entire theological manifesto.

The princely payoff in reading Thompson's quite courageous book lies in the opportunity to think about some very profound matters in the science and theology conversation in the deft hands of an esteemed nuclear physicist who also happens to be of Swedenborgian persuasion. *Starting Science from God* is not what one would call an easy read, but it qualifies nevertheless still as a beginners guide to a the big "religion and science" conversation and many of its component parts.

I highly recommend buying not just one copy of this book, but more to share with others. For a spiritual tradition that has so often boasted of its compatibility with modern science, we should all be immensely grateful to Ian Thompson for explaining resourcefully and insightfully why this is in fact true. ☩



About the author: Ian J. Thompson is a nuclear physicist in the Nuclear Theory and Modeling Group at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, having until 2006 been professor of Physics at the University of Surrey, UK. His research deals with coupled-channels and few-body models for nuclear structure and reactions, especially concerning halo nuclei. He is a fellow of the Institute of Physics.

Dr. Thompson maintains an excellent website for Starting Science from God that continues commentary on many issues and offers a blog: beginningtheisticscience.com.)

The Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence, is dean of the Swedenborgian House of Studies at Pacific School of Religion.