God’s Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Modern Science

James Hannam


This book immediately leapt off the shelf with the divine figure on the cover applying a set of mapping callipers across a map of the globe, while being backgrounded with Latin text and the words “Et figura...” being discernible among symmetrical floral bunches to balance the page. The book delivers on what it promises.

Covering six centuries, Hannam does a wonderful job of stitching together the fragmentary knowledge many of us have about science in these centuries. The overall scope is broad with the full geographical expanse from Alexandria to the Atlantic, Africa to Norway on a tapestry peopled with notables and many more insignificant names too. Like a fireside chat, Hannam’s narrative tone is conversational as he weaves his magic upon the reader.

Delightfully, he anticipates our immediate reactions taking time out from the narrative frame to follow through on a familiar name or event to explain a significance or consequence perhaps less well known today. The arrival of the new Greek learning and its frantic translation into Latin for example makes for exciting reading with familiar resonances for us now. As a result, he produces a page turner of worth for the student and scholar alike.

Hannam redresses the historical impression in English language accounts that Protestantism alone championed science and that magic and religion covered the Continent by contrast. With dextrous strokes, he concludes that science progressed about evenly on both sides after the Reformation. With an historian’s scalpel, he makes the subtle distinctions we need today to correct the banter and hype so long surrounding the medievalists. He supplies the relevant political and academic contexts to understand events and decisions. For instance, Copernicus used the language of his current community of scholarship to propose his purely hypothetical observations even dedicating his major work to Pope Paul III who obviously took the adulation but never read the book.

His baseline tension throughout, I guess, is the dominant ideology and shadow of Aristotle over everything – asserting logic and inhibiting discovery and empirical experimentation. Hampered by his perfect plan, the polymath medievalists stuck to what they knew – the truths of logic and the perfection of creation – in the face of and in defiance of observable facts at times. Hannam sympathetically outlines how this tension suffuses ‘science’ throughout the era. Interestingly he argues that Copernicus supplied a simpler way of
explaining the facts in the same way that Harvey’s circulation of the blood challenged the Aristotelian paradigm.

I found Hannam’s chapter explaining the pervasive force of magic and the widespread influence of astrology was very helpful. His Chapter 7, “Bloody failure: Magic and medicine in the middle ages” is a discursive review of the sad history of the mistaken attempts to cure suffering, as is Chapter 10 “Medicine and anatomy” showing how experimentation upon the body the progressed medical science enormously at last because dissection was possible in the West under papal protection whereas in Muslim and Arabic countries such a practice was not. Hannam does succeed in showing how God’s philosophers in the medieval world laid the foundations of modern science.

The book is produced rather economically with amazingly too few graphics, diagrams or any photographs at all. Yet his appendices cover 110 pages to include an index of key characters, a timeline, extensive endnotes, bibliography and a useful general index. This first hardcover edition is typeset in Caslon 540 making the text large and readable in bed, beside the fire or, less likely these days, on public transport as befitting the nature of the cogent story telling. Highly recommended.

Reviewer: Gregory Smith completed his doctorate at Australian Catholic University in Brisbane on “Images of Salvation: A Study in Theology, Poetry and Rhetoric.” He lectures in Australian poetry and theology, and is a regular contributor to AEJT.