Harrison’s work represents part of a number of ambitious projects undertaken in the last two decades to deconstruct the standard, ideological presentation of the relationship between science and religion, scepticism and the rise of modernity, and the role of rationalism in the Enlightenment. His methodological convictions lie in the re-reading and reinterpretation of historical artifacts which have typically been read as placing theological motivations in the shadow of strict epistemological, sceptical, and rationalist motivations. The convergence of these interrelated theses, against which Harrison contends, is formulated within the context of the narrative of Adam’s fall and its impact during and after the Protestant Reformation. The central argument thus concerns the illustration of “the ways in which the myth of the Fall informed discussions about the foundations of knowledge and influenced methodological developments in the nascent natural sciences” (3).

As an ambitious underlying claim, the role of the Protestant Reformation, the crisis of authority it instigated, and a reinvigorated Augustinian anthropology are presented as paramount to the development of the early modern scientific endeavour. Harrison argues convincingly, and with a wealth of historical data, that in their appropriation of Augustinian theology, the Reformers, in grappling with the biblical narrative of the Fall and original sin, focused attention upon the human mind and its limitations (65). While Catholic Thomists interpreted the Fall as a loss of supernatural gifts (grace), the Protestant Reformers tended to perceive Adam’s loss as one from natural gifts to very few natural remnants (170). The distinction is crucial, for in reading Adam’s dispossession as natural, early modern Protestants facilitated the rise of an optimistic attitude which believed the first man’s legendary gifts might be within the grasp of human reach (58). For, in Harrison’s own words, “since [Adam] had once commanded nature on account of his natural gifts, it was not unreasonable to hope for partial restoration” (81). From the sixteenth and seventeenth century discussion of Adam’s prelapsarian condition there thus arose questions and programmes of how such knowledge could be restored and by what means.

Before providing evidence for the restorative project, however, Harrison takes a few pages to contest the influential Popkin thesis. Richard Popkin has argued in History of Scepticism, among other places, that the sceptical crisis issued by Montaigne’s appropriation of ancient thought was responsible for Descartes’ attempt to lay the foundations of knowledge (85-88). “A better candidate for the ‘womb of modern thought’ than the ‘nouvea Pyrrhonisme’ of Montaigne,” Harrison argues, “is a neo-Augustinian anthropology, chiefly associated with the reformers” (85). It is unfortunate that so few pages are dedicated to refuting the Popkin thesis, yet it is made clear throughout the remainder of the book that it is inherently incompatible with Harrison’s thesis.

Drawing upon a vast array of significant seventeenth century natural philosophers, Harrison reveals the instruments, such “as telescopes and microscopes [employed to] redress the physical losses of the Fall” (96); the methodological strictures, including “rigorous testing of knowledge claims, repeated experiments, [and] communal witnessing” (51); and later, the language programmes of Wilkins, Dalgarno, and Lodwick (211) - all of which were meant to address the problems emerging from a theologically informed anthropology. Much of the latter half of this book is then dedicated to addressing Bacon’s experimental programme, the impact of the
narrative of the Fall on his work, and the inaugural methodology of the Royal Society.

In addressing the question of the Fall’s gradual diminution from experimental science, Harrison focuses on Newton as a transitional figure. “As it turns out, such anthropological concerns are almost completely absent from the Newtonian corpus” (234); the most probable reason for this lying in Newton’s personal rejection of Patristic theological doctrines (the trinity and original sin), and the unusual confidence he had in his mathematical and experimental method. Though theological anthropology was eventually written-out of science, “leaving the impression that experiment was self-evidently the proper way to pursue scientific investigation,” (16) Harrison proves it was certainly once there.

Moreover, he challenges the ideological assumption, originating in the French philosophes, that an unshakable faith in the powers of human reason is responsible for the rise of science. It is, in fact, quite the contrary.

Peter Harrison is a foremost writer on the historical foundations of the relationship between science and religion. Along with two other monographs, and a host of articles, this work is of immense value to anyone who intends to delve beneath our ideological assumptions about the rise of science. The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science is erudite, very readable, and a formidable challenge to widely held scholarship in its field.

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