

Stephen A. McKnight. *The Religious Foundations of Francis Bacon's Thought*.

Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006. xii + 194 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$37.50. ISBN: 0-8262-1609-9.

The title of Stephen McKnight's book raises a question. Anyone who has read Francis Bacon's writings will have noticed strong religious elements, but did they amount to "foundations"? Bacon was undoubtedly an orthodox Christian who often quoted biblical texts and drew on both Old and New Testament ideas and images. But his orientation was this-worldly, and his often-expressed goal was to improve the quality of life in this world. Perhaps a more suitable metaphor would be that of a framework.

Professor McKnight's defense of Bacon's allegiance to religious tradition is certainly timely, given the wave of criticism that Bacon has suffered in recent years. His opening chapter concerns the *New Atlantis* (1627), that strange hybrid which begins with a Renaissance voyage narrative leading to the rediscovery of a lost island, Bensalem. This turns out to be a benevolent patriarchal society echoing Jewish customs, which also contains Solomon's House, a scientific research institute which provided the acknowledged blueprint for the founding of the Royal Society. McKnight takes issue with a number of Bacon commentators who have ignored the book's strong emphasis on charity, philanthropy, and the role of science in relieving human misery. In 1968 Howard White accused Bacon of manipulating religious themes in order to subvert Christian ideas and justify luxury and materialism. In 1979 and 1985 Jerry Weinberger produced hostile readings of the *New Atlantis* and other works to indict Bacon of advocating a totalitarian control of knowledge. More recently, a younger generation of commentators writing in the 1990s (Marina Leslie, David Innes, Denise Albanese, Amy Boesky) have made Bacon guilty of inverting the spiritual and material worlds, displacing Christianity, favouring "intellectual imperialism" and "reverse colonialism" (whatever that means).

Professor McKnight patiently refutes these hostile accounts, revealing the consistent pattern of biblical imagery in the *New Atlantis*, which includes a hierophany, a column of light appearing on the ocean topped by a cross, an ark floating on the waters containing books of the New Testament unknown to European Christianity and a letter from the apostle Bartholomew, Christian symbols of the

cherubim's wings, and other details. To these allusions to the lives of Noah and Jonah a third major biblical figure is added, Solomon, whom Bacon often invokes in his natural philosophy, idiosyncratically interpreting a biblical passage (1 Kings 4:33) as showing that he compiled a natural history. An important character in the travelers' encounter with Bensalem is Joabin the Jew, whose name looks back to the biblical Joab, remembered for retrieving the Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines. This detail reinforces Bacon's account of the Bensalemites as another chosen people, picked out to legitimize the foundations of the new science in seventeenth-century Europe. This fluid movement between past and present, myth and history, is typical of Bacon's eclecticism, and creates a kind of laying on of hands to bless the future scientific community.

His effective rebuttal of the secular-materialist-hedonist-imperialist image of Bacon is the most valuable part of McKnight's book. But by placing it first the remaining chapters work backwards in time, covering works that Bacon published in 1620, 1609, and 1605, or even left unpublished. Since Bacon regularly repeated ideas as he elaborated them into more complex units, reading backwards produces a feeling of anticlimax. The book would have been more effective if it had culminated with the *New Atlantis*. None of Bacon's mature philosophical works is so imbued with religious motifs, and in long sequences where the author outlines Bacon's program for a new science, religion does not figure. Unfortunately for his thesis, McKnight's conscientious summaries of these books fail to reveal any religious foundations. (He also seems unaware that he is largely quoting from Victorian translations of Bacon's Latin.)

Most surprisingly, although McKnight rightly indicates that Bacon, like most of his contemporaries, accepted the biblical account of Original Sin, he fails to discuss Bacon's *Confession of Faith*, which Spedding printed in 1859 (*Works*, vol. 7) and dated to ca. 1603. In my edition of this work (*Francis Bacon*, Oxford, 1996) I showed that Bacon was deeply influenced by Calvinism, and took literally Calvin's doctrine of the corruption of man and nature as affecting the laws of nature. According to Bacon these laws "began to be in force when God first rested from his work and ceased to create" on the sixth day of creation. But after God cursed Adam for his disobedience the laws of nature, like the rest of creation, Bacon reasons, must have "received a revocation in part" — that is, a "calling back," or reduction in energy. The only exception to this falling off is God's power to work a miracle, which Bacon sees as a "new creation," but only partly and indirectly, "not violating Nature, which is his own law upon the creature." This definition of miracles recurs in the *New Atlantis*, one of several continuities of thought within Bacon's work which McKnight might have followed. His book will be useful to beginning students, yet scholars familiar with the range and cogency of Amos Funkenstein's *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, 1986) may be disappointed by this sensible but unadventurous study.

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