

The Divine Challenge: on Matter, Mind, Math and Meaning, by John Byl

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Not too long ago trade books written by well-respected people in the sciences began dotting the shelves of popular bookstores. Many of them are philosophic treatises on a range of topics: sweeping overviews of the universe (Steven Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*); adjudications of scientific controversies (John Casti's *Paradigms Lost: Images of Man in the Mirror of Science*); and broad accounts of the flow of human thought with general predictions of the ultimate fate of the universe (Machio Kaku's *Hyperspace*, or *Visions*).

Many of these works display distinctively non-Christian perspectives. Using Kaku to illustrate, he postulates (*Hyperspace*, page 312) the possibility of an evolved analog computer super-robot that, at the *big crunch*, may somehow escape to a "hyperspace" outside of our universe, and from there begin the universe again with the declaration, "Let there be light." In the concluding pages of *Visions* (page 352), he states, "According to this startling new picture [of infinitely many parallel universes], in the beginning there was Nothing. No space. No time. No matter or energy. But there was the quantum principle, which states that there must be uncertainty, so even Nothing became unstable, and time particles of Something began to form."

Happily, books like the above, but with Christian perspectives, are also now appearing. In 2001 ACMS member John Byl completed *God and the Cosmos* (Banner of Truth Trust), which offers a Christian view of cosmology. Now, Byl has produced another work. *The Divine Challenge: on Matter, Mind, Math and Meaning* (2004, Banner of Truth Trust) displays an impressive grasp of philosophical and theological ideas woven together in a 298 page treatise. The proper audience for this book should be impressed not only by the breadth of topics covered, but also by the reasoned nature of Byl's arguments.

What is the divine challenge? Actually, it is a "double challenge, from God to man and from man to God, to establish who will rule" (page xiii). According to Byl, modern man, in his arrogance, has presumed that he can be the measure of all things, and, armed with a naturalistic worldview, give an adequate account of reality. Byl examines the plausibility of this thinking with special attention to four big-ticket items: matter; mind; mathematics; and meaning.

The book has 15 chapters arranged into several main parts. The preliminary chapters frame the challenge and present criteria by which worldviews may be judged viable. Several following chapters analyze how well a naturalistic worldview explains various phenomena. Then, Byl presents a Christian worldview, which, unfortunately, he dubs *The Christian Worldview* (italics mine). Next, several chapters deal with theological issues such as God's relation to the physical world, freedom and determinism, body and soul, and a Christian view of mathematics. Finally, there is a nice summary. Each chapter begins with two quotations, one representing an atheistic view, and an opposing one taken from scripture. The reader is then treated to a series of probing questions indicating what the chapter is about, followed by a penetrating analysis and eventual summary of the ideas presented.

Byl frequently refers to mathematics, arguing in chapter 3, for example, that naturalism has great difficulty in explaining the existence of mathematical objects, which Byl indicates in chapter 8—*Mysteries of Mathematics*—have a real but non-material existence located in God's thoughts. He also argues in that same chapter that naturalism cannot adequately account for mathematical intuition, or why mathematics applies so widely to the physical world. Other “mysteries” at least point to mathematical realism for Byl, such as the sense of discovery one encounters in exploring constructs like the Mandelbrot set.

There are two other chapters whose titles specifically deal with mathematics, of which one, chapter 7, *From Mind to Math*, argues more for the failure of naturalism to provide a satisfactory account of why we can have confidence in our reasoning ability. Byl's thesis is similar to that given by C.S. Lewis in *Miracles*, who argues that genuine notions of truth cannot coherently exist in a being that arose from strictly naturalistic “blind-chance” causes. (This argument was recently expanded by Victor Reppert in his book *CS Lewis's Dangerous Idea*.)

Chapter 14, *A Christian View of Mathematics*, seeks to explore the relation of God to mathematics. Byl again opts for mathematical realism, but also attempts to ground a portion of mathematics—including the law of non-contradiction, the axiom of choice, and notions of a completed infinity—on attributes of God found in the scriptures.

Byl writes with flair, often using metaphorical images that make the pages skip along. Consider, for example, the following synopsis he gives of modernity (page 290).

Modernity is collapsing. In the modern world, human reason elevated itself above God and claimed sovereignty. This entailed that it could criticize all beliefs. Yet, once reason was given license to criticize all things, it was inevitable that it must eventually criticize also itself. Then reason un.masks itself as unreasonable. Critical human reason, once uncorked, is an insatiable acid that dissolves *all* absolutes, whether in religion, ethics, science or logic. Eventually it erodes even its own foundation, causing modernity to self-destruct.

As well thought out as the book is, there are some items that Byl might consider by way of improvement if the opportunity for a new edition presents itself. The first relates to the reading audience. The writing style is quite assertive, and while all of Byl's criticisms of a naturalistic worldview are good ones, many could be quickly met with ready-made answers from people holding such perspectives. Thus, I worry that my agnostic friends would dismiss the book too readily. Likewise, I worry that newer Christians, who may bank portions of their faith on some of the arguments, eventually will find plausible alternatives to them, and thus be thrown into a quandary. Such concerns would be assuaged if Byl were to make two simple changes.

First, he could allow opposing views more grace by adding some preliminary remarks similar to those made by Reppert in his defense of C.S. Lewis: "It seems to me that many discussions of Lewis's arguments treat these arguments as finished products, to be accepted or rejected as they stand ... There are, of course, valid points to be made on the side opposing Lewis ... [who] can either be offered as a final answer or as a spur to think the relevant issues through oneself" (Reppert, pages 12 – 14). Second, Byl might consider toning down the certainty with which he dismisses a variety of positions. Several times throughout the book he makes concluding statements like, "Such questions xxx is unable to answer," where xxx is the name of a person espousing a view with which he disagrees.

There are also instances of what I would call inappropriate criticisms of silence. For example, Byl classifies William Hasker as a "semi-materialist" and takes Hasker's view of the soul to task. I would rather dub Hasker as an emergent dualist, but in any case Byl objects to Hasker's belief that souls emerge in conjunction with bodies and that God somehow sustains souls after death. Says Byl, "Hasker gives no detailed argumentation as to how the soul-field can transcend physical properties. Nor does he give any rationale for the soul-field becoming self-sustaining at, or before, the death of the brain" (page 245). But Byl himself gives no such "detailed argumentation" of his version of dualism, stating simply that the "separation [of body

and soul] occurs at death [but that] ... the soul is ultimately to be reunited with a renewed body” (page 243). To be sure, Byl draws his conclusions from scriptural propositions, but Hasker can make the same appeal. In other words, if Byl wants to assert the existence of a distinct soul, and rely on scripture to conclude that the soul can interact with the body while the person is alive yet continue to exist when the person dies, so can Hasker, and Hasker’s level of explanation would be the same as Byl’s, even though Hasker has the soul emerging as the body develops.

Sometimes Byl supports a position with arguments that I would judge to be specious. To illustrate, he argues for a strong form of election, claiming that even faith itself is a gift of grace, citing Ephesians 2:8 as supporting evidence: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” But if one wants to argue for Byl’s conclusion of faith as a gift, this passage cannot be used to sustain it, because the Greek word translated as *that* (touto) is in the neuter gender, and thus does not refer to the feminine noun *faith* (pistis). So what does the word *that* refer to? Actually, *that* literally reads as *this*, and it probably refers to the verb *have been saved*.

Byl is extremely well-read, and has an impressive bibliography. Nevertheless, there are at least two sources he omits with which he could have profitably interacted. *Conversations on Mind, Matter, and Mathematics* (Princeton, 1989), pits biologist Jean-Pierre Changeux, who argues that mathematics is merely a product of neural interactions in the human brain, against mathematician Alain Connes, who argues for an objective, independent existence of mathematical objects. Additionally, Byl chose not to include any references from *Mathematics in a Postmodern Age: A Christian Perspective*, (Eerdmans, 2001) though he had numerous opportunities to do so. This disappointment does not stem from my being an editor of that project. Rather, it is because Byl has missed an opportunity to point his readers to another resource—one definitely written from a Christian perspective—that they might find profitable.

Finally, there are some minor inaccuracies in the book. Kant is said to be an empiricist (page 38), a label that would puzzle philosophers, as no empiricist would accept Kant’s notion of the synthetic-apriori. A better classification is a constructivist, or maybe a rationalist-empiricist hybrid. Euclid’s theorem on the infinitude of prime numbers is said to be an *indirect* proof that “starts off by assuming the number of primes is *not* infinite” (page 145). Actually, Euclid’s theorem is a *direct* proof of the claim, “Prime numbers are more than any assigned multitude of

prime numbers.” Perhaps less significant, Gödel’s theorem could be nuanced a bit more precisely, and Goldbach’s conjecture is cast as “any even whole number can be written as a sum of two primes” (page 145). Byl evidently chose not to bother his readers with a subtler version of Gödel’s theorem, or with the requirement that Goldbach’s conjecture requires that the even number be greater than 2. A danger with this approach, however, is that some knowledgeable folks, who are reading skeptically and looking for things to pick at, may, because of these glosses, tend to read the rest of the book more dismissively than they would otherwise.

All things considered, John Byl has produced a notable work. He should be commended for the time and care he put into it. I am glad I read it, for it contained many thought-provoking ideas. I would recommend it to a variety of people, but in giving them my recommendation I would want to mention some cautionary notes already discussed. Meanwhile, I will look forward to further scholarly writings from the author in the years ahead.