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The Now and the Not Yet: A Review of The Art of New Creation

Abstract

"What does it mean to create art that reflects the reality of new creation, in a way that is attentive to the gritty particularities of our present moment?"

Posting about the book *The Art of New Creation* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-now-and-the-not-yet-a-review-of-the-art-of-new-creation/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

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The Now and the Not Yet: A Review of *The Art of New Creation*

Justin Ariel Bailey

June 27, 2022

Title: *The Art of New Creation: Trajectories in Theology and the Arts*

Author: Jeremy Begbie, Daniel Train, and W. David O. Taylor

Publisher: IVP Academic

Publishing Date: March 29, 2022

Pages: 280 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1514003268

About 10 years ago, whilst in the thick of pastoral ministry, I started thinking about PhD studies. The previous year I had returned to graduate school, compelled by pressing questions from the emerging adults I was serving. I had become convinced that imagination was a missing piece in both Christian witness and faith formation. Unfortunately, beyond reading C.S. Lewis, I wasn't sure if the imagination or the arts were the sorts of thing one could study at a theological school. I asked my advisor if there might be a PhD program specializing in imagination and the arts. "Actually," he told me, "there are three."

Around 2000, the divinity school at St. Andrews (Scotland) started the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts (ITIA). About the same time, Fuller Seminary began offering a similar concentration. In 2009, ITIA gave birth to a partner program at Duke Divinity School: Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts (DITA). All three programs had significant enrollment from graduates of evangelical colleges and seminaries, and still do to this day.

I ended up at Fuller, but I share the history to note the fruitfulness of the past two decades of theological reflection on imagination and the arts. A burgeoning field of study has taken shape. A new book, *The Art of the New Creation* (IVP Academic, 2022) represents a small harvest, made possible by the diligent cross-pollination of theologians seeking to learn from artists, and artists seeking to learn from theologians.

Edited by Jeremy Begbie, David Taylor, and Daniel Train, this volume draws from the proceedings of the DITA-10 conference at Duke (celebrating 10 years of DITA). It takes its theme from 2 Cor. 5:17: "if anyone is in Christ, new creation has come!" The doctrine of creation has obvious connections for artistic creativity, but what about the *new creation*? As Begbie points out in his introductory essay, the new creation "is already secured in the past" by the resurrection, "lies ahead of us as an ultimate goal," and "faces us as a reality we are invited to

enter here and now.”¹ What does it mean to create art that reflects the reality of new creation, in a way that is attentive to the gritty particularities of our present moment?

Indeed, between the DITA-10 conference (September 2019) and the publication of this book (April 2022), the world went through the double upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic and widespread protests over racial injustice. The result is that each chapter in this book reckons in some way with these crises. At times the engagement can feel formulaic: reference the crises in the introduction and the conclusion to set up the urgency of the argument. But most of the time the crises give vital shape to the argument itself, as with Jacquelyn Price-Linnartz’s standout essay, “The White Savior as Diseased Creation,” which traces our diseased social imagination through blockbuster films.²

The roster of contributors to this book is impressive; for me, an Avengers-level assembly of authors whose work has shaped me deeply. Natalie Carnes is here, penning a short but scintillating foreword about “Mary, Untier of Knots.” Malcolm Guite and Judith Wolfe discuss the divergences between Lewis’ and Tolkien’s understandings of creativity. Richard Hays interviews Michael O’Siadhail about his stunning work *The Five Quintets*. The book closes with a moving sermon by N.T. Wright.

But perhaps many of these names are only known to specialists. Truly, *The Art of the New Creation* remains an academic work, with at least half of the chapters pitched at professors like me. Indeed, two of the essays I found most illuminating (as a person working in this area) were deep in methodological concerns.

Daniel Train’s essay, *Love’s New Creation*, reconciles the aesthetic theory of Nicholas Wolterstorff and Rowan Williams with reference to the Augustinian distinction between “enjoyment” and “use.” Wolterstorff is interested in “art in action”—the way we use the arts to ennoble everyday life—while Williams is interested in the contemplative necessity of art—the way that works of art exceed themselves with meaning. What unites these two thinkers, Train shows, is love: “*use* and *enjoyment* need not ultimately be in opposition, since rightly using the arts as a way to enjoy God means that we also experience the enjoyment God takes in God’s creation.”³

Kutter Callaway’s essay, *Transcendence, the Arts and New Creation*, shows how often theologians make claims about what art does or does not do, and whether we can trust fallen human capacities to rightly respond to transcendence. These are not just theological claims, he writes, “They are psychological claims as well, for they have to do with human perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. These psychological phenomena are not merely open to empirical scrutiny, but in certain important respects, they demand it.”⁴ Callaway argues that the fruitful partnership between theology and the arts would benefit from a third partner: psychological science.

Despite the academic level, the further one reads into the book, the more one discovers that there is something here for everyone. The book is organized into three parts:

Part one, “Soundings”, contains eight short essays exploring variations on the theme of new creation. This is where the specialist will spend most of her time. Part two, “Conversations”, captures four dialogues between outstanding practitioners in the field. Here it will be worth chasing the links to watch the recording of these conversations, the energy of interaction irreducible to the printed page. Part three, “Arts in Action”, gives space for five artists (three visual artists, a dancer, and a musician) to reflect on the theme of new creation with reference to their work. This is the section that I am most likely to give to my undergraduate students, and the questions posed to each artist are worth asking the artists in your life:

- – What do you find most satisfying about your work as an artist, and what do you find most challenging?
- – What is a point of contact between your work as an artist, the Covid-19 pandemic, and recent attention to ongoing crises of racism and racialized inequalities?
- – What is a point of contact between your work as an artist and the theme of creation and new creation?
- – How does your work offer “good news” to our broken world today?
- – In one sentence, how would you describe your vocation as an artist?

Artists nurture our imagination, shift our perspectives, open new possibilities, and teach us to pay attention. I am thankful for their work, and for the work of others who are listening for resonance with the now-and-not-yet new creation.

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1. p. 2
 2. p. 102-121
 3. p. 68
 4. p. 75