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The Doctrine of Creation: A Constructive Kuyperian Approach (Book Review)

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The Doctrine of Creation: A Constructive Kuyperian Approach

The Doctrine of Creation: A Constructive Kuyperian Approach

Bruce R. Ashford and Craig G. Bartholomew

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448pp

The Doctrine of Creation: A Constructive Kuyperian Approach is an account of the Christian doctrine of creation written from a Kuyperian neo-Calvinist perspective. Its co-authors, an Anglican (Bartholomew) and a Baptist (Ashford), discovered Kuyperian and Dooyeweerdian thought as outsiders to Dutch Calvinist church life; they come from an evangelical Protestant heritage and appreciate Kuyperianism for its robust view of creation and the significance of ordinary creational structures. They note that there hasn't been much explicitly Kuyperian systematic theology in recent decades, and they seek to redress this deficiency with this volume.

The introduction and Chapter 1 argue for the need to confess faith in the doctrine of creation and the Creator. It isn't obvious to all that the world is created, let alone that the Creator is good. This is why the Kuyperian tradition has emphasized the distinct role that faith plays in giving an account of the created order. Chapters 2 and 3 give a history of the doctrine in its "travails and glories." According to the authors, over the ages, the doctrine of creation has oscillated between a biblical and realistic account of creation and something they call "gnosticism." With this term they refer to their belief that many ancient and medieval Christian theologians have denigrated the created order. Yet not all of them failed. They think that St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 115-200) got the doctrine of creation right. On their view, Kuyperian neo-Calvinism expands on St. Irenaeus's doctrine to include all of created life as good and therefore worthy of exploration in theology.

The following eight chapters cover a range of topics: God's power to create out of nothing (Chapter 4), an exposition of the six days of creation and commentary on Genesis 1:1-2:3 (Chapter 5), a celebration of the different kinds of things God made – from plants, the seas, to human beings (Chapter 6), the reality of angels and demons and why attention to them in our day is necessary (Chapter 7), individual and social sin, known in Kuyperian terms as "misdirection", and some possible solutions to these

problems (Chapter 8), the contribution of the neo-Calvinist doctrine of common grace and the Kuyperian emphasis on culture making (Chapter 9), the doctrine of providence, especially the idea of divine preservation (Chapter 10), and eschatology, including a commentary on Revelation 21-22 that argues for a restoration of God's material creation at the end of time (Chapter 11). Chapter 12 is a finale. It attempts to show how the doctrine of creation shapes how we think about a range of issues like philosophy, eating, time, science (especially evolutionary theory), transgender and transhumanist ideologies, and the notion of human dignity.

A good deal of the book is given to detailed exegesis of biblical texts. This is intentional: the authors are attempting to emulate Kuyper and Barth. The commentary on Genesis 1:1-2:3 in chapter 5 and Revelation 21-22 in chapter 11 is valuable for anyone interested in interpreting these texts. The text is laid out in two formats: the main text, in larger font, contains the authors' main argument, and a secondary text, in smaller font, covers difficulties that aren't required to grasp the main argument but are still important anyway. This feature makes the text accessible to two audiences: educated pastors and laypeople, one with formal theological education, and the other with little theological training required other than basic fluency in Christian concepts. I found the argument of Chapter 6 helpful: as we read Scripture and look at the natural world, we ought to approach the world with a sense of wonder and awe. We haven't done the best job thinking about the doctrine of creation if we don't come away from it looking at the world with wonder. Creation theology done well should lead us to praise the wise and good Creator.

The book traverses a wide range of sources, from Augustine to Dutch Calvinist thinkers to Karl Barth, interlocutors not typically treated in the same volume in this depth. Probably because of this range, the historical chapters suffer from a lack of rigor and accuracy. I'll offer two examples. The authors claim that Origen (c.185-254), a great Church father and commentator on the Bible, posited a "hierarchical chain of being" (p. 55). According to them, a hierarchical chain of being includes the metaphysical claim that "some beings are higher (and therefore more real) than others" (p. 55). They give no reasons for thinking that Origen believes in a hierarchical chain of being. Furthermore, it's clear that the authors think that a hierarchical chain of being is bad, especially as it appears in Plotinus's thought (pp. 45-46). But here too they give no clear reasons for thinking why. They seem to think that believing in a hierarchical chain of being perhaps causes or gives warrant for a low view of creation (p. 47). On that view, perhaps, one who believes in a chain of being necessarily holds that material creation is therefore "less good" than the spiritual realm. But it isn't clear at all that this inference is logically sound, let alone whether Origen denigrates creation. They cite Origen only once to claim that "[Origen's] eschatology is one that leads to disembodied existence in God" (p.

55). Origen's eschatology has been highly contested as is well known, but it doesn't lead to "disembodied existence." He not only affirms a bodily resurrection but grapples with the scriptural teaching that our resurrected "spiritual" bodies are in some sense the same as our earthly bodies (Origen, *On First Principles* II.10.1-2, cf. 1 Cor. 15:45).

Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274) comes up for criticism too. Relying on a quote from Colin Gunton's *Triune Creator* (not the text of Aquinas himself), the authors accuse Aquinas of replacing Christ with Aristotelian philosophy as his central framework, leading to an ambivalent account of creation (p. 62). Drawing on one text in Aquinas's John commentary, they note that Aquinas affirms that God created all things good. Because Aquinas adopted Aristotle, he downplayed the importance of material creation. For Aquinas, "mind takes priority over matter", the authors argue, "and the (immaterial) mind seeks to rise beyond the material world" (p. 63). They offer two citations from the *Summa theologiae* (ST), Aquinas's masterwork, in support of this claim, but they don't tell us how these texts demonstrate this conclusion. While it's clear that Aristotle influenced Aquinas, it's commonplace in Thomistic scholarship now to assume that Aquinas attempted to employ philosophy to understand the Christian faith he believes, including the nature of created existence as derived from God's own act of existence. Whether Aquinas succeeds in this is an important matter, of course, but for these critical claims to be persuasive, the authors need to show us how Aquinas fails to uphold the goodness of material creation in his works.

Despite these criticisms, Ashford and Bartholomew have written a wonderful exposition of biblical teaching that praises God the Creator. This virtue makes it deserving of wide and careful reading. I am grateful to have read it, and I shall return to it.