

Simon Oliver, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017), pp. xiii + 209, £16.99.

This is a vigorously-written and important contribution to the 'Perplexed' series. Beginning from Genesis 1-3 and the tradition of its interpretation, Oliver moves to a consideration of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and the use of the doctrine by Augustine and Aquinas. After providing a grounding in Thomist thought Oliver turns to consider contemporary scientific cosmology of origins and concludes that it poses no competition to classical theology and metaphysics. Chapter 3 takes us deeper into Aquinas – into a dense account of participation, analogical thinking and the double agency account of causation. Oliver then returns to science, but this time to the history of the rise of science, showing how the notion of 'the book of nature' emerged and developed after the Reformation, but also how mechanistic philosophy evacuated the created world of the sense of intrinsic teleology Aquinas had derived from Aristotle. Oliver deplores this trend and wonders if 'There may be aspects of the world that we do not see because we do not first and foremost, before all else, see the world as created.' (131)

I was delighted to see that the last chapter was to be devoted to environmental issues, and here Oliver's argument is that creation *ex nihilo* is the ultimate freely-given gift, by which we may know something of the character and power of the giver. Oliver is right, I think, to focus on food as the best example of ecotheology at work, and the eucharist as the paradigm of our return offering of what God has already given.

In relation to the interpretation of Gen 1.1-2 in terms of *creatio ex nihilo* it would have been useful to draw more attention to the second-century desire to resist schemes that relied on the imperfection, or evil, of the material world. Also to ask why Christians might still want to make that hermeneutical choice. And what, indeed, we understand by calling creation 'very good'. Also, in the brief mention of Aquinas on miracle, it would have been interesting to touch on the conviction of Thomists like Denis Edwards who would see miracle as involving not an absence of secondary causes, but a set of secondary causes not yet understood.

The two tests Oliver sets a theology of creation are: first, does it preserve a clear distinction between God and creation? Second, does it give an adequate account of God's relationship to creation? I would also want to set two somewhat different, and perhaps more contemporary tests: first, does the theology provide an opportunity for creative dialogue with, and learning lessons from, contemporary science? Second, does it give an adequate account of the problem of suffering, especially those harms and sufferings that are not principally caused by humans? Different thinkers will give different answers to the latter questions. My own sense is that approaches based on the conviction, going back to Augustine, that evil is no more than an unintelligible privation of the good, offer little purchase on the ambiguity of natural processes, be they plate tectonics or evolution by natural selection.

Another way of putting this is to ask whether the great Thomist metaphysical structure can indeed serve as an overarching framework within which to accommodate all searches for knowledge and understanding, including those of the natural sciences. Many will be glad to

answer in the affirmative. Some will feel that Aquinas unaided does not offer an adequate response to the latter pair of questions in the preceding paragraph.

Oliver makes his case with great clarity and lucidity (even if the explanation of analogical thinking required a density of argument beyond the general tone of the book). As he concedes, he has had to be highly selective in his choice of material. He is very reliant on Peter Harrison for his historical content, a choice few will dispute. More will contest the choice of Michael Hanby as exponent of the science-theology relation. It will seem to many odd to discuss the ecotheology of creation without touching on Jürgen Moltmann, or the theology of gift exchange without Anne Primavesi, or creation's return of praise without Richard Bauckham.

This is an admirable book which I shall certainly use in first-year undergraduate teaching, and which would also be suitable background for theologically literate leaders of church groups. But the above omissions are reflections of the fact that this is not a survey of the theological territory of creation so much as a very articulate exposition of what a particular tradition can offer.

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