Theology after Darwin

edited by Michael S Northcott and RJ Berry
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reviewed by Daryl P Domning

This collection of essays by eleven authors, mostly representing the humanities, is a mainly British production embracing both Protestant and Catholic perspectives. Its title left wide latitude for focus—historical retrospective, present state of the art, exploration of future possibilities for development of doctrine, or a bit of each—but nearly all the authors have leaned toward the first choice.

Geneticist RJ Berry lays the groundwork by briefly outlining the history of Darwinian thought, and a little of its reception by theologians.

Denis Alexander, editor of Science & Christian Belief, analyzes the “intelligent design” (ID) movement, concluding (like many others) that it represents “a rather poor natural theology.” He stumbles, however, in his discussion of ID and “naturalism” when he ignores the elementary distinction between methodological and metaphysical naturalism.

Moral theologian Amy Laura Hall offers a perceptive critique of Victorian social and theological Darwinism, as epitomized by “Darwin’s churchman” Charles Kingsley. In his influential writings, the popular themes of providence and progress were readily read into the idea of natural selection, reinforcing contemporary currents of racism and colonialism. Kingsley’s “Christian Darwinism,” superficially congruent with some of today’s evolutionary theology, is in fact a serious distortion of the Christian message, which (far from favoring competitive replacement of one nation by a “fitter” one) seeks to supplant genetic kinship, and nationhood itself, by the Reign of God.

Ellen Davis, a biblical scholar with interests in agriculture and its ecological, social, and religious dangers, finds in what she calls “Deep Darwinian thinking” a sense of ecological limits that is also deeply biblical: “The intertwined symbols of manna and Sabbath point to the biblical understanding that only an economy disciplined by restraint does justice to the God who created heaven and earth, and therefore to all the creatures that God sustains in life” (p 71). In our present crisis of overpopulation and overconsumption, no more relevant or urgent theological conclusion could be drawn.

Professor of divinity David Fergusson traces the development of ideas of divine providence from Darwin’s time to modern acceptance of evolution as continuous creation in a world “governed by law and processes of emergence” (p 88).

Francisco Ayala outlines the paleontological data on human evolution, and discusses three
major research frontiers in human biology: the transformations from egg to adult, brain to mind, and ape to human. Disappointingly, however (for a geneticist who is a former priest), he says almost nothing about theological implications beyond hinting at the problematic nature of the concept of “soul.” He does not even cite his own most theologically pertinent paper (Ayala 1995), nor any other literature for that matter, limiting the usefulness of his chapter.

Professor of ethics Michael Northcott, after a somewhat convoluted sketch of Victorian ideas on evolutionary ethics, concludes with the more fruitful observations of modern comparative ethologists like Frans de Waal. Northcott argues for the fundamental “mindfulness” of all living things (similar to Teilhard’s “inwardness”), but also affirms that empirical observations of life and evolution cannot justify moral positions. Other species, nevertheless, have “moral worth” that Christian ethics must recognize; this reflects immanent divine creative activity, which is the ultimate source of moral principles.

Ethicist Neil Messer, drawing on Christopher Southgate, lucidly classifies attempts to deal with the “problem of evil.” Messer offers his own solution, based on Karl Barth, and then critiques some aspects of Southgate’s synthesis. Of course I have a dog in this fight too (Domning and Hellwig 2006), and would quibble with both of them; but the fact that our views overwhelmingly overlap suggests that we are converging on a common answer.

David Grumett, a theologian specializing in modern French Catholic thought, argues for the relevance and viability of natural theology after Darwin—along the lines of Teilhard, as defended by Henri de Lubac and Donald MacKinnon. For example, Grumett compares the Scholastic idea of “soul” with Teilhard’s theory of spirit, which is more satisfactory due to its cosmic scope. Grumett also notes that “[w]ell-founded evolutionary natural theology has the potential to correct the abstract and privatized character of much current spiritual and theological reflection, which lacks meaningful references in the material world” (p 169)—an observation with which a scientist can heartily agree.

In the last chapter (perhaps fittingly, the one that seems the most forward-looking in terms of progress of theological thought), theologian Denis Edwards addresses the eschatological redemption of “all things”. Based chiefly on St Paul, on the patristic tradition (especially Maximus the Confessor), and on Karl Rahner, Edwards argues intriguingly for participation in redemption and resurrection by each individual animal that has ever existed. Correct or not, he at least tackles a topic that most Christian theology has failed to address explicitly.

This book is a useful resource for anyone interested in its subject; I will probably use it myself as a source of readings in a planned course on evolution and its theological implications. But it is a resource compromised by a gross editorial oversight: the “composite bibliography” omits many of the references cited in the chapters, not excluding those by the editors themselves. This, plus inconsistent dates between text and bibliography given for yet other references, will repeatedly frustrate the serious reader.

**References**


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