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Essay Book Review

Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory: A Critical Review

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Gijsbert van den Brink, *Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020). 328 pages. Paperback; $39.99. ISBN: 9780802874429.

Whatever the natural sciences can really demonstrate to be true of physical nature, we must show to be capable of reconciliation with our Scriptures; and whatever they assert in their treatises which is contrary to these Scriptures of ours, that is to Catholic faith, we must either prove it as well as we can to be entirely false, or at all events we must, without the smallest hesitation, believe it to be so.
Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, I.21.41

"This is a book for Christians who want to make up their mind on evolutionary theory, as well as for non-Christians who consider the faith but are convinced of evolution" (p. 1). Six major challenges to Christian theology are discussed with excursions into Reformed theology when appropriate. The verdict is that they can be met in ways true to the Gospel. There have been a few books dealing with this question from the perspective of a particular theological tradition. This is the first one that does so for Reformed theology. The book is very well organized; the arguments are clear and accessible to the general reader. A must read for theologians, biologists, and anyone interested. Strongly recommended.

The first three chapters set the stage. Chapter 1 introduces Reformed theology as a unity in diversity: with the help of Wittgenstein's metaphor of family resemblances, Reformed theology is understood as a range of confessions, denominations, and theological accents reflecting a particular stance characterized by a catholic Christian perspective. Some of its features are challenging and others helpful in coming to terms with evolutionary theory. As a stance, Reformed theology tends to intensify the following catholic affirmations in relation to evolution. It underlines the meaning of scripture as a whole in the interpretation of the Bible (*tota Scriptura*). It stresses the openness to correction (*semper reformanda*). It cherishes the world in which we find ourselves, for it is the work of the Creator as expressed in the "two book" metaphor of the Belgic Confession written by Guy de Brès. In this chapter, van den Brink opposes Karl Barth's interpretation of this metaphor and correctly underlines the open attitude the Reformed tradition has historically had toward science. Yet, he could have admitted that, although the Reformers granted the idea of a natural knowledge of God in their use of the images of spectacles (Calvin *Institutes* I.vi.1) and books (de Brès) of nature and scripture, they were critical of nature as an independent source for this knowledge.

Chapter 2 is devoted to avoiding misunderstandings by defining the relevant scientific concepts. Overall this is very successful with one exception. "Gradualism" (p. 36) is used to refer to the fact that fossils are found in a sequence of increasing complexity (pp. 54–55) apart from any interpretation (p. 36). But "gradualism" is also used to describe a central concept in the history of evolutionary thought (pp. 37–40). More confusion is created because "gradualism" is a current interpretation of biological evolution as a process, and the author uses gradualism with that meaning as well (p. 99). Finally,

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"complexity" is open to multiple interpretations. There is genomic complexity, functional complexity, and structural complexity, to mention a few. Why not use "sequentiality" to refer to the fossil record? Further, he introduces the three levels in evolutionary theory distinguished by Fowler and Kuebler[1]—deep time, common descent, and natural selection by random mutation—surveys their theological implications, using them to organize chapters 4–8 accordingly.

Chapter 3 addresses the relation of evolutionary theory and scripture interpretation. The view that biblical statements about the physical world correspond to scientific facts (concordism) is rejected. It distorts the interpretation of both nature and scripture. Moreover, concordists must invent new harmonizations with scripture whenever scientists discover new facts. This is self-defeating. The author's alternative is perspectivism, "the hermeneutical view that when the Bible is interpreted, its theological content should be distinguished from the world picture within which this content is embedded" (p. 81). He distinguishes biblical, theological, and scientific perspectives. Theological content is rooted in the history of events—an overarching theme in scripture clearly affirmed by the author. The distinction between theological content of the Bible and the world picture in which this content is embedded appears to be a reference to divine accommodation. But, the author explains, the principle of accommodation is not without problems. For instance, how does one decide that the story of creation, fall, and redemption is due to divine revelation rather than human imagination? How does one determine what in the story belongs to the theological content rather than to the world picture? The author argues that these two cannot be cleanly separated. But theological content can be identified by the fact that it belongs to the narrative focus of scripture. To explain how to handle apparent conflict between science and scripture, van der Brink appeals to G.C. Berkouwer: "Certain results of science, be it natural science or historical research, can provide the *occasion* for understanding various aspects of scripture in a different way than before" (p. 94). That is, as (alleged) data of science can be reconsidered in the light of scripture, so can established interpretations of scripture be reconsidered in the light of science for the theological meaning of the Bible cannot contradict what we know from the sciences.

The author does not go further into detail about Berkouwer's hermeneutical principle. This is unfortunate because it is commonly applied when extra-biblical sources are used in exegesis. It is thus important in describing the relation between science and the interpretation of scripture. Berkouwer's hermeneutical principle quoted above is not specifically Reformed. Yet, Berkouwer's quote finds its background in the theological discussions surrounding the (in)famous so-called snake trial of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in 1926, which also related to creation and evolution. In particular, the term "occasion" was meant to safeguard the *sola scriptura* of the Reformation. Later reflections on this principle underlined that the exegetical, historical, and theological debate regarding biblical texts ought to be open to weighing all the available data and the diverse methods from a specific perspective by asking to what extent they help in understanding scripture.[2]

Accordingly, two important theological remarks are to be made with respect to the use of the above-mentioned principle: (1) To respect the authority of scripture, any (new) interpretation of scripture has to be justified on scriptural grounds, and (2) Science must also provide its own justification, because God has created a world of material things, and therefore, this materiality needs to be respected and this respect consists in submitting our understanding of nature to the things God has created. These rules help avoid imposing science on scripture and vice versa, or accepting conflict between scripture and science. Van den Brink seems to be willing to follow these principles (p. 176). By not making them explicit, however, his analysis runs the risk of primarily being concerned with safeguarding the theological meaning of scripture.

The remainder of the book addresses the theological implications of animal suffering (chap. 4), common descent (chaps. 5, 6), and random variation and natural selection (chaps. 7–8), all in the context of the three levels of evolutionary theory.

Theological Responses to Animal Suffering

Chapter 4 reviews theological responses to animal suffering. Before addressing them, two preliminaries are covered: what scripture says about animals (God glories in creating predators and in providing prey for them) and whether animals can suffer (likely). Next the author turns to the main reasons why people think animals suffer: human sin, God's plan, and demonic agency. These responses predate Darwin and did not change after the emergence of the theory of evolution. Therefore, the theory of evolution did not introduce these problems. But the discovery of animal suffering before the existence of humans did provide an occasion to reconsider the notion that human sin caused a cosmic fall.

The author applies the principle of using the results of science as an occasion for a reinterpretation of scripture in the light of scripture as a whole in his rejection of the cosmic fall interpretation. That leaves two responses. The second one focuses on how a good God can create suffering. As for demonic involvement in animal suffering, representatives including C. S. Lewis, Michael Lloyd, Alvin Plantinga, Thomas Torrance, Neil Messer, and Nicola Hoggard Creegan are discussed in some detail as this view is not well known. The pros and cons of demonic agency are clearly explained. Van den Brink concludes that "as tiny and sinful human beings we are not in a position to evaluate what sorts of evils

God may or may not permit" (p. 134). In this, the author rightly emphasizes that we can only reflect on this issue as fallen human beings. As Job did not know why he was suffering, so we do not know why animals are suffering. Christians trust that God has good reasons to include animal suffering in his plan. It is to be noted that Jon Garvey recently also pointed to the fact that prior to the Reformation, most Christian writers understood the inherent wildness of the world (including predation) as part of God's glorious and good creation.[3]

Theological Implications of Common Descent

Chapter 5 discusses how to understand human dignity and the image of God if they were created through evolution. Historically, human dignity was emphasized by inflating the status of Adam and Eve. This strategy aimed at stressing the height of the Fall, the blameworthiness of the first couple, and the boundless grace of God. But it surpassed what the text warranted. Evolutionary creation affects this approach. Animal ancestry downgrades human dignity, thereby diminishing the Fall. But it does so only if human dignity and the image of God are defined in terms of characteristics unique to humans, as has been traditionally done. Human uniqueness was questioned when its defining characteristics were found in animals, and this diminished human dignity. The author avoids this outcome by grounding human uniqueness not in their evolved attributes, but in the calling of God to be his representatives. This view of the image of God concurs with other recent reflections on the *imago Dei*, for instance that by John Kilner.[4] This does not exclude the existence of uniquely human attributes. Only humans are religious as the author affirms and only humans are concerned for the good which is what defines moral behavior (chap. 8). We add recently discovered unique attributes, including genes required for human brain development and joint attention behavior.[5] Thus, animal ancestry does not need to downgrade human uniqueness. But unique characteristics no longer constitute the image of God. Further, animal ancestry raises the question discussed in the next chapter, whether humans can be blamed for behaviors inherited from animal ancestors.

Chapter 6 prepares this discussion by introducing the five exegetical approaches to Genesis 2–3 distinguished by Denis Alexander. The aim is to test whether common descent can be compatible with the historicity of Adam and the Fall as well as with death as punishment, original sin, and the need for salvation.[6] The "prehistorical" and the "protohistorical" readings of the biblical chapters are thought to "remain faithful to the historical and covenantal character of Reformed theology, while doing justice to the scientific data on human origins" (p. 166). These are incorporated into a hypothetical narrative that associates the events involving Adam and Eve and those represented by them with the Upper Paleolithic Revolution, roughly 45,000 years ago, when archaeological evidence of full personhood was thought to appear at the time of writing. But the story of Genesis 2–3 is set in the Neolithic farming culture of the Middle East of 10,000 years ago. The author speculates that the time gap may have been bridged by revelation, prophetic divination, or critical adoption of older ancient Near Eastern materials put to text much later. He observes further that since anatomically modern humans (AMHs) first appeared 200,000 years ago, Adam and Eve are not the first AMHs and may have been created from AMHs.

In van den Brink's own opinion, this reconstruction of early human history suits the Reformed principle of using the results of science as an occasion for a reinterpretation of scripture. Such usage is as uncontroversial as the use of ancient Near Eastern records in biblical exegesis. Therefore, it cannot be viewed as a concordistic way of imposing "any (purported) scientific discoveries on the text" (p. 179). At this point, however, the above-mentioned criteria added to van den Brink's principle turn out to be helpful in evaluating whether this is indeed the case.

First, it is to be noted that the reconstruction of early human history under discussion combines important theological dimensions with available scientific data. Therefore, as such, the reconstruction is not justified by science itself and has to be understood as a theological model. Accordingly, the question is: Does this use of scientific data in the interpretation of scripture suit the criteria for this use and can the result be justified on scriptural grounds? Here, two problems occur.

1. Biblical scholars generally agree that nonbiblical data can be used in the interpretation of a text only if there is some overlap in the chronological horizons of both the text and the historical data or the availability of its information. Yet, that is not the case here: neither general historical knowledge nor the Bible contains data that can be used to create a convincing channel of transmission from the supposed events in the Neolithic period to the composition of the biblical story in the Late Bronze or Iron Ages. Accordingly, from the perspective of scholarly exegesis, it is simply unjustified to create such a connection. The only way to escape this objection is to state that the biblical story is the product of immediate divine revelation or prophetic divination. But that would be highly speculative, for the text does not contain any indication in that direction and none of the interpretations used by van den Brink explains the text in this way.

2. Another problem is the portrait of Adam and Eve in the biblical story. Van den Brink rightly highlights their symbolic and representational nature. Thinking of them as a group is not against the text. Yet, it is an enormous step to identify the concrete people of the story—human beings with bodies, a character, and emotions; who act, talk, and make choices; who also function as the head of the ancient Near Eastern kinship group "humanity"—with the abstract hypothetical group of the species of

hominids as reconstructed by science. Even when one agrees with van den Brink that, although both categories, each in its own way, refer to the past and therefore might in some way or another be related, in the end, the types of information are too different in nature to be connected. As a result, the hypothesis offered by van den Brink is concordistic, contrary to what he claims. Some further reflections on the nature of scientific reconstructions and history would have been more helpful. In line with van den Brink's methodology in chapter 3, a perspectivist approach needs to highlight the limited nature of the evidence from scripture, nature, and history. Accordingly, it would be better to conclude that from a systematic-theological point of view, science, Christian doctrine, and biblical exegesis are not incompatible with one another, but that, in this case, we simply do not have enough information available to offer a unifying historical narrative.

More convincing are the author's more-conceptual reflections regarding the relation between common ancestry and the Fall. He maintains a historical fall as an account of why humans sin. The alternative—that we inherited sinful tendencies from animal ancestors—destroys human accountability and, with that, the need for redemption. The author proposes a re-contextualized Fall that is compatible with common ancestry. Humans and their ancestors arose as a group. God equipped AMHs with self-awareness and free will so that they could be held morally accountable after being called to be God's image. But since God had not yet given the law, the behaviors inherited from animal ancestors were not yet counted as sin. This allows the author to interpret original righteousness and holiness as innocence, because without law they could not know what sin was. The assumption is that God gave a law in some form—at the least, created in the heart (chap. 8)—and that free will included the ability to resist the behaviors inherited from animal ancestors. God's call to be God's image may have gone to a couple representing the group. They may have been the first to act in willful disobedience, which was then imputed to all those they represented. Or perhaps all of them committed the first disobedience, with the first couple functioning to describe this type of human being. Here again, however, problems would arise. The more concrete the hypothetical historical narrative becomes, the harder it will be to construct a straightforward connection with the biblical narrative. For instance, it is hard to see how the evolution of deception, theft, sexual promiscuity, and violence against fellow humans in the hypothetical historical narrative could connect with the spiritual evil symbolized by the snake. The author refrains from making his hypothetical narrative more concrete.

Common ancestry is often taken to threaten the need for redemption. The author promotes a prelapsarian view. That is, from eternity, God planned an evolutionary creation and the vicarious death of God the Son. This view implies among others that redemption is part of creation. Specifically, the salvation of humankind is part of its creation which is still unfolding. Common descent does not rule out that redemption is in God's plan of creation, that we are fallen, and that we are responsible for our fallen state. Thus the author sees no threat to the need for redemption.

Theological Implications of Random Variation and Natural Selection

Assuming that evolution is true, chapter 7 asks whether random processes fall under divine sovereignty and providence. Are there theological implications of random variation and natural selection for divine providence? It is especially important to distinguish fact and interpretation, the author warns, because the interpretation of randomness has been shaped by world views. For instance, some argue that since variation is random, it clashes with divine guidance. But this follows only if randomness is interpreted as a metaphysical or religious category. It does not follow if one acknowledges that God gave creatures relative autonomy to act. Random processes are created and, therefore, under God's power. Compatibility is gained by distinguishing between divine (primary) and creaturely (secondary) causation. Thus, properly distinguished, randomness and divine guidance are compatible because they belong in different categories.

Others argue that since the variation required for evolution is random, no divine guidance is needed in explanation. The author responds that this does not entail that divine guidance is false. One must distinguish between the technical meaning of randomness in evolutionary theory (not guided by environment) and its metaphysical interpretation (not guided by God). The former does not entail the latter. Thus random mutation and divine providence are logically compatible. This is an astute solution to the problem, in line with the distinction between first and secondary agencies in classical theology.

Finally, the author proposes that randomness can be considered consonant with divine providence. His example is evolutionary convergence, that is, the tendency of organisms with different evolutionary histories to have the same solution to particular problems. Take the problem of detecting prey. Squid, jellyfish, and humans have the so-called camera eye that allows perception in three dimensions. This has been explained in terms of a combination of law-like and random behavior. It makes the point that randomness is integral to the order of nature as created by God. God is certainly able to guide random processes, because he has created them. Van den Brink concludes that the theory of evolution is not only compatible with, but also consonant with the existence of a God who knows and controls random processes. We wish the author had made the providence of God more concrete by mentioning the Holy Spirit as an agent immanent in creation.

Chapter 8 assesses the possible implications of Darwinian evolution for views about social life, morality, and religion. Since there is no agreement on how to define religion, the author refers to religious experiences, practices, attitudes, et cetera, for the sake of argument. But for himself, he defines religion using the Christian doctrine of revelation. One of the implications is that humans have a natural capacity to know God and to discern good and evil because that is how they have been created. The introduction of this faith commitment is appropriate, because it operates on the same level as the faith commitment to naturalism. Thus the author affirms an objective and external source of religious knowledge expressed in God's will. This includes moral knowledge.

The author first reviews mistaken implications of evolutionary theory that have moved Christians to reject it. These include the naturalistic fallacy and attempts to reduce human social and religious behavior to its biological basis driven by anti-religious ideology. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the cognitive science of religion (CSR) because it is the current paradigm for natural explanations of religion. While current CSR is weak both theoretically and empirically, he proceeds on the assumption that those challenges will be overcome as follows. First, the classical Christian view of morality and religion is that Christians find their source in God's revelation. Second, this view is discredited according to many scientific critics of religion, because science explains morality and religion in terms of natural causes. Third, the author takes the critics' argument to be that natural causes exclude supernatural ones. He neutralizes this argument by countering that God could have used natural means to bring about the capacities for morality and religiosity. Just as the causes involved in producing this text explain nothing about its content, similarly the causes involved in the evolution of morality and religion do not explain or explain away their content. Further, he takes the scientific critics of religion as rejecting revelation as a source of moral and religious knowledge. This rejection, he concludes, is an implication of philosophical naturalism, not of science.

More specifically, the author counters that atheists cannot accept the reliability of scientific knowledge while rejecting that of moral and religious knowledge, if one accepts that both have evolved in natural ways. Logically, this is correct, but the premise is false. The reliability of science is achieved by trial and error. The history of science reveals many incorrect explanations, as the author points out in chapter 2. This is what one would expect if the cognitive processes underlying the production of knowledge are the product of evolution. An evolution of cognitive processes by random variation would lead one to expect correct as well as incorrect scientific theories. However, this also applies to moral and religious knowledge. If God uses random variation to create a diversity of moral and religious knowledge, does God not create the conditions for moral and religious relativism? One might counter that God may have used natural selection to create true moral and religious knowledge. But this would bind God to the way natural selection operates. What is selected depends on the selective forces and these vary randomly.

Chapter 9 concludes that

> although evolutionary theory does not leave unaffected our ways of thinking about the doctrine of scripture, the goodness of God, theological anthropology, the history of redemption, divine providence, and the doctrine of revelation, there is no reason to think that these classical loci fall apart as soon as one starts to take evolutionary theory seriously. (p. 266)

However, we must reject a hermeneutic of concordism as well as the cosmic fall and the notion that human history starts with Adam and Eve. As for other doctrines—eschatology, miracles, Christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology—he argues that there is no need for further adaptations. What about the doctrine of creation? It has not been mentioned, mainly because, from a theological perspective, it does not address how creatures evolved. It deals with more important issues, such as who the Creator is, why God created anything at all, that the Creator transcends the creation, and that the latter depends on the former.

To conclude, this is a very well-informed volume that will be of immense help for anyone asking what consequences evolutionary theory would have for one's faith and theology. It is clear, comprehensive, and nuanced in its discussion of systematic-theological issues that might be affected by evolutionary theory. ●

Notes

[1]Thomas B. Fowler and Daniel Kuebler, *The Evolution Controversy: A Survey of Competing Theories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

[2]Koert van Bekkum, "'How the Mighty Have Fallen': *Sola Scriptura* and the Historical Debate on David as a Southern Levantine Warlord," in *Sola Scriptura: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hans Burger, Arnold Huijgen and Eric Peels (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 159–60. For similar reflections, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 231–37.

[3]Jon Garvey, *God's Good Earth: The Case for an Unfallen Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 71–102.

[4]John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

[5]David Wilcox, "Our Genetic Prehistory: Did Genes Make Us Human?," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 66, no. 2 (2014): 83–94; ____, "A Proposed Model for the Evolutionary Creation of Human Beings: From the Image of God to the Origin of Sin," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 68, no. 1 (2016): 22–43; and Felix Warneken, Frances Chen, and Michael Tomasello, "Cooperative Activities in Young Children and Chimpanzees," *Child Development* 77, no. 3 (2006): 640–63.

[6]Denis Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?,* 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2014).