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Reformed thinking on Evolution (Expository Times Book review no. 4668)

Gijsbert van den Brink, *Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory* (Eerdmans, 2020), £?, pp. xv + 328, ISBN 978-0-8028-7442-9

It hardly needs saying that different strands within the Christian tradition have responded very differently, both historically and in the present day, when it comes to a perception of Darwinian evolutionary theory which sees it as posing challenges to faith. Such variation might in part be attributed to theological emphases, and in part to the socio-political contexts within which those traditions are located. Gijsbert van den Brink notes that ‘As a result of their special doctrinal emphases, Reformed folks have their own problems with evolutionary theory’, adding that there has been little work concentrating on ‘the relationship between *Reformed* theology and evolutionary theory’ (p. 2). It is on the areas which are potentially problematic for this theological tradition that he focusses in this book; and he is a persuasive advocate for the view that it is perfectly possible to see evolutionary theory as compatible with a Reformed Protestant perspective.

Van den Brink begins with a discussion of the distinctiveness of Reformed theology, noting its rootedness in confessional statements but also the ‘remarkable diversity and plurality’ (p. 18) of the Reformed tradition as it has unfolded through time in various social and geographical locations. He then devotes a sequence of chapters to topics which have been seen to present particular challenges to Reformed theological perspectives: biblical interpretation, theodicy, theological anthropology (how may we speak of human uniqueness whilst simultaneously acknowledging our origins in evolutionary processes?), covenantal theology (how can talk of a Fall make sense within an evolutionary paradigm?), divine providence, and finally the suggestions originating from the cognitive science of religion, that

an evolutionary narrative might explain not only the origins of biological diversity but the origins of religions themselves.

Through all these topics van den Brink offers a level-headed appraisal of the issues at stake. He concludes that there are three areas where ‘adjustments’ to classical Reformed theology are necessary if evolutionary theory is to be accepted by those within this tradition: ‘we can no longer uphold a concordist hermeneutics [the view ‘that biblical statements pertaining to the physical world correspond to scientific facts’, pp. 74-5], the theory of the cosmic fall, and the idea that human history started with a single couple’ (p. 273). However, he maintains that ‘Since these issues hinge on matters of biblical interpretation, in none of these cases ... is biblical authority or any other Reformed doctrinal tenet necessarily at stake’ (p. 274).

Van den Brink’s stated aims are to assure Reformed Christian believers that their faith does not require them to resist evolutionary theory, and to assure non-believers that the Reformed Christian tradition does not require them to forego so well-established a theory if they are to accept that tradition. Readers falling into either of these camps who are swayed by careful, nuanced, reasoned argument will find much here to savour; and it is to be hoped that van den Brink’s book may also find a readership beyond the specific constituencies which he has in mind.

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