

## Gijsbert van den Brink, *Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory*

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What does it mean for the Christian faith if evolutionary theory is true? While many scientist-theologians, such as Ian Barbour and Arthur Peacocke, have engaged this question in various ways, systematic theologians have seemingly avoided the debate. In this book, the Reformed theologian Gijsbert van den Brink invites his fellow theologians to reflect more deeply on the significance of evolutionary theory for Christian thought. Although van den Brink's main goal is to show that evolutionary theory poses no challenge to the coherence of Reformed theology, his overall conclusions are relevant and applicable to other Christian traditions as well.

Chapter 1 outlines the distinctiveness of the 'Reformed Stance', focusing specifically on the centrality of the Bible and the emphasis on God's perfect goodness. This stance cannot be reduced to any one doctrine, but it can be viewed as 'an *intensification*' of doctrinal commitments found in other churches. The Reformed stance contains within itself a plurality, yet the heartbeat of this tradition is the wish to 'let the Word of God and the Word of God alone determine the church's faith and life' (p. 22). Given this emphasis on scriptural authority and God's perfect nature, evolutionary theory poses a special challenge to the Reformed tradition.

Contemporary evolutionary theory is a pluralistic phenomenon and encompasses several claims about the natural world. First, it needs to be carefully distinguished from 'evolutionism', which designates a worldview according to which the processes of evolution rule out the existence of God (p. 33). Second, although 'evolution' simply means development or change over time, this theory includes in modern discourse three key theses: gradualism, common descent and natural selection. Together these claims yield the view that the earth has been subjected to evolutionary forces for a very long time, that all life on earth has descended from a common biological source and that life's diversity can be explained by natural selection acting on random mutations.

These features of evolution pose hermeneutical challenges for understanding the Bible, and van den Brink offers two potential hermeneutical routes for accommodating an evolutionary perspective: concordism and perspectivism. The former approach is, essentially, a 'harmony-searching' enterprise, which seeks to link up biblical statements to scientific facts. This is a great category mistake, which conflates the purpose of scripture and the aims of the natural sciences. Rather, we should embrace the perspectivist 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).

Such a perspectivist outlook bears upon important theological questions. How can we square the reality of animal suffering with the goodness of God (chapter 4)? How can we make sense of human uniqueness in light of common descent (chapter 5)? Can covenantal theology be rendered consistent with evolutionary theory (chapter 6)? These issues have given rise to a wide range of responses, and there is merit to most of them. Van den Brink emphasises that we need to avoid the concordist mistake of deriving scientific truths from scripture. For example, our uniqueness should not be cashed out in terms

of scientifically observable properties, but ‘we are special for theological reasons’ in how we relate to God (p. 158). Our uniqueness therefore ‘cannot simply be read off from the natural world’ (p. 159). Nor should we go down the concordist route and try to harmonise the covenant narrative of Genesis 2–3 with the discoveries of science.

One might get the impression that van den Brink is content with establishing mere *compatibility* between the Reformed stance and evolution, such that one does not commit some logical fallacy by holding both to be true. He goes further than this, however, by attempting to show how the Reformed tradition can continue to tell a compelling story about humanity and its place in nature given what we know about the world (p. 195). Indeed, chapters 7 and 8 both point towards *convergence* between the Reformed stance and an evolutionary depiction of the world. It is commonly believed that natural selection rules out that the evolutionary process is divinely guided, and that biological phenomena are randomly generated. Yet, as van den Brink goes on to show, there are those within the biological community who suggest that there are directional trends in evolution towards complexity. Simon Conway Morris has, for example, argued for the reality of convergence; that is, constraints in evolution which make the emergence of intelligent life probable, if not inevitable. There ‘is no logical connection between convergence and providence, but the two fit in with each other very well’ (p. 226). Likewise, though some believe that the cognitive science shows that religious belief is merely an adaptation, or a by-product of an advantageous trait, the *naturalness* of religious beliefs might speak to the fact that we have been created for entering into a loving relationship with God.

Van den Brink points to a possible convergence between a Reformed view of providence and the dynamics of evolution, yet we should at the same time be ‘cautious as not to “baptize” evolutionary theory’ (p. 272) by equating the divine activity with the processes of evolution. This is an important reminder, given the abundance of proposals in science-and-theology discussions which seek to frame divine action in terms of the latest fashionable scientific theories.

Van den Brink has delivered an important contribution to the science and theology dialogue, demonstrating both the points of convergence between the Reformed tradition and evolutionary theory, and the significance of Christian theology more broadly for thinking about the nature and directionality of evolution.

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## Jonathan J. Sanford, *Before Virtue: Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics*

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The cleverly, if slightly misleadingly, entitled *Before Virtue* is an elegantly simple book that impressively sets out its argument, pursues it transparently, chapter by chapter,