

detail at points, but that should keep no one from celebrating the gift O'Collins has provided in this panoramic view of a landscape that is too often insufficiently explored.

doi:10.1017/S0036930619000486

## Jesse Couenhoven, *Predestination: A Guide for the Perplexed*

(London: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 2018), pp. x + 191. £60.00.

Michael Parker

Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, 8 Elseka Elbida, Abbsaya ([Mike.Parker@etsc.org](mailto:Mike.Parker@etsc.org))

In our modern democratic world, the idea of divine predestination is often dismissed as a mistaken, outmoded and even offensive doctrine. Indeed, one staggers before the questions it raises. Why would a good God predestine creatures for a world where there is so much evil and that, in the end, leads to hell for many? Moreover, if human beings lack free will, what is the point of creating them at all? An automaton cannot not be a morally responsible agent or one who meaningfully loves or hates or feels remorse. Divine predestination – taken as an unbending determinism – seems to be a pointless exercise in nihilism and sadism.

Yet free will is also not without its problems. As human beings, we are not in control of the most formative influences on our lives – our families, cultures, nationality, educations. In effect, we are dependent creatures and, at the very least, partially determined by our circumstances. Even if capable of a high level of rationality, few among us have the time or inclination to carefully examine our most fundamental choices. For good or ill, we most often make choices on the basis of intuition. Moreover, not being omniscient, we lack the ability to make fully informed decisions. Therefore, though we may want to be the sole authors of our destiny, this is actually a bad idea. Giving humanity free will would be like handing a child the keys to the family car.

Jesse Couenhoven, Assistant Professor of Moral Theology at Villanova University, in Pennsylvania, carefully summarizes the mainstream thoughts on this subject by reviewing a handful of seminal thinkers: Augustine, Anselm, Luther, Calvin and Barth. All of them, except Anselm, embrace some form of predestination. Couenhoven carefully probes each of their positions, revealing their various strengths and weaknesses. While appreciative of Anselm, he generally rejects his weak position on predestination, which is based on foreknowledge and in the end is indistinguishable from human free will. Though Luther is often seen as a single predestinarian and Calvin an advocate of double predestination, Couenhoven argues that there is actually little difference between them. Their position, though nuanced, Couenhoven believes to be overly deterministic. He is especially approving of Augustine, Aquinas and Barth for their 'compatibilist' syntheses of predestination and free will.

For compatibilists God's predestining of every human being does not mean that humanity lacks some degree of agency – or free will. It does mean, however, that God's will is predominant while human free will is secondary. The paradox is resolved

if these wills are not at loggerheads. If the divine and human wills are non-competitive, then God is able to effect the large ends at which he aims while human beings, within highly circumscribed limits, are able to exercise their free wills. In effect, God and human beings are co-authors of the human script. This also assumes that free will can legitimately be said to exist when human beings are not in fact free to choose between competing alternatives. Couenhoven examines this theological chestnut at length, presenting classic arguments that make sense on their own terms but that modern readers, culturally conditioned to call a spade a spade, may not find convincing.

The greatest argument against predestination is the problem of evil. Compatibilism may harmonize the divine and human wills, but it does not explain natural disasters such as illnesses, earthquakes and tsunamis. Nor does it explain why God would create human beings destined to eternal damnation. On the latter point, Couenhoven finds Barth's view helpful. For Barth, despite numerous scriptural passages that assume the existence of hell, universal salvation remains a blessed hope because of the nature of the Christian God, which is love. From this perspective, a predestining God who intends to save everyone – even if some are let into the kingdom postmortem – is the best solution.

Couenhoven provides a concise and balanced assessment of the predestinarian tradition and, in the final chapter, offers his own thoughtful if tentative conclusions. Throughout the book, he reminds readers that predestination, despite popular misconceptions, is not an invention of Calvin or a morbid Protestantism. It is in fact a view that is deeply embedded in the scriptures – especially the Pauline epistles – and was held by such formidable Catholic theologians as Augustine and Aquinas. Modern Christians may thoughtlessly dismiss this doctrine as an abstruse relic of a medieval Christianity, but this would be a mistake. This doctrine, as Couenhoven presents it, is central to the Christian faith and – properly understood – is an appealing theological option.

doi:10.1017/S0036930619000450

## **Mark S. Smith, *The Idea of Nicaea in the Early Church Councils, AD 431–451***

**(Oxford: OUP, 2019), pp. xiii + 230. £65.00.**

Richard Price

Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham ([r.price@heythrop.ac.uk](mailto:r.price@heythrop.ac.uk))

The story of the christological controversy from the First Council of Ephesus till Chalcedon is a familiar topic, but one that has suffered from too selective a reading of the sources and dubious presumptions about what the main actors thought they were about. This new monograph cannot offer comprehensive coverage, but pursues a particular question to give coherence: how did the rival factions interpret and attempt to exploit the Nicene Creed? This captures what the two sides were actually trying to do: not to 'develop' doctrine, but to interpret the tradition correctly. What Mark Smith offers is not a systematician's analysis and evaluation of the options, but an historian's mapping of the stages in the debate. This he does with a minute attention to the texts